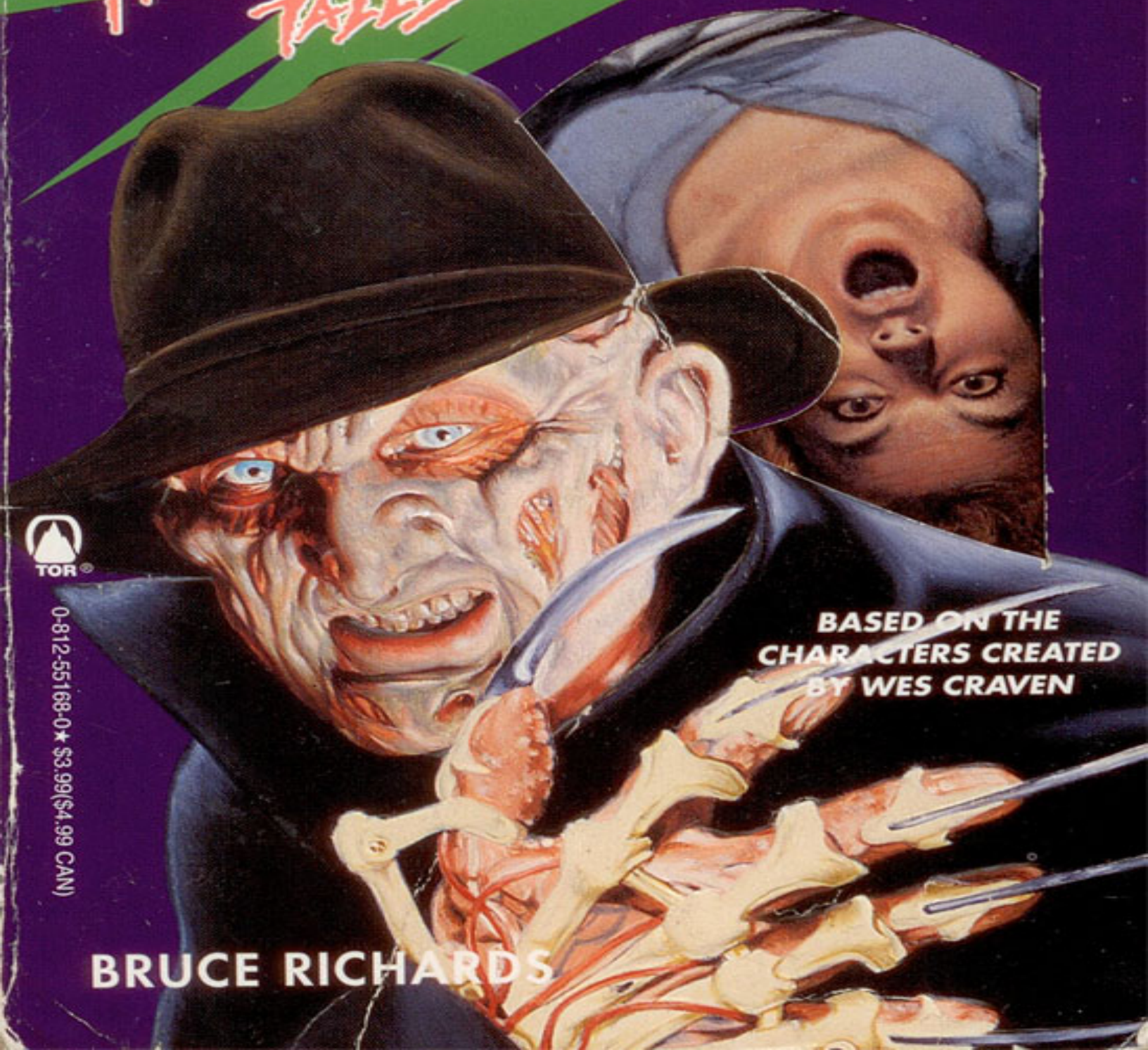
BLIND DATE

A NEW ELM STREET NOVEL

FREDDY KRUEGER'S™ TALES OF TERROR



BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

BRUCE RICHARDS

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Annotation

Alicia has it all: good looks, talent and the star of the football team for a boyfriend. Why then, is she hanging around with «weird» Evan, the nerd? Evan is the biggest dweeb in school and Alicia feels sorry for him and for all the cruel jokes her friends play, but sympathy only makes it worse. The nicer she is to Evan the more they beat him up. Then Alicia's friends begin to disappear. A dead cat with its eyes plucked out is found in the trunk of a car and a terrible accident is about to happen. But will it really be an accident?

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Bruce Richards
Freddy Krueger's Tales of Terror #1: Blind Date

Prologue

Sheets of rain pounded the houses along Elm Street, the wind bending the trees nearly at their roots. The old, boarded-up house at the corner creaked as if in pain. A sudden gust of wind made its way inside and blew an upstairs door decidedly shut.

A slow-moving, hulking figure of a man crossed the hall on the second floor. His face was a mass of pale, horribly crisscrossed scar tissue, the eyes mercifully hidden behind heavy black sunglasses.

The man descended the stairway, his walk stiff. He flipped up the collar of his tattered raincoat, and stepped out into the pulsing rain. His razor-tipped fingers glinted in the light of the street lamp as he pulled the brim of his oversized, slouchy hat down low over his forehead, casting his loathsome face into shadow. Then he hunched his awkward, angular figure into the pounding wall of water.

He pulled a blind man's cane out from under hisraincoat; then, dark glasses still in place, Freddy Krueger tapped his way down the broken flagstone walk toward a battered hearse in the driveway. The hearse was waiting for him, its engine idling.

The door of the hearse swung open as Freddy approached. He slid his bony body in behind the steering wheel, and the door slammed shut. Freddy's raspy voice hacked through the wet air like a buzz saw:

"Ever been on a blind date that didn't exactly work out? A blind date from hell? Can't say I have. In fact, I didn't go on a date of any kind when I was in high school. Maybe the girls were scared of me. I guess they didn't like the way I gave them the eye."

Freddy slowly slid the dark glasses up and off his face to reveal the dripping, empty sockets where eyes should have been. They looked as if the eyeballs had been gouged out only moments before.

His sadistic cackle echoed down the empty street.

"Yeah, I never had a date. But maybe this time I'm gonna get lucky."

The hearse coasted down the driveway, then disappeared into the gloom of the night.

*** * ***

A storm was ravaging Springwood. The dark sky broke apart again and again as jagged lightning bolts lanced earthward toward Elm Street.

One bolt struck a lightning rod perched atop Weird Evan Walker's house. The jolt shook the house all the way down to the basement. The house rattled, as if being shaken by a huge, monstrous hand. A shutter broke loose from its top hinge and hung at a crazy angle, the wind whipping it back and forth against the side of the house.

A short distance down the street from Evan's house, the persistent banging woke Alicia Norris from a deep, peaceful sleep.

An innocent sleep.

Groggily, she sat up on the edge of her bed. Where was that noise coming from? she wondered. Could someone possibly be hammering at this time of night? In this weather?

She hunted for her slippers with her bare toes. The wood floor felt cold and wet against the soles of her feet. Rain had gotten in. She found the slippers, soft and fuzzy, and pushed her feet inside. She stood up then and walked to her bedroom window. Outside, the storm raged on. The fierce wind whistled through the trees that grew outside her window, rattling their branches like bony, skeletal hands.

A sudden bolt of lightning transformed the branches into toothy jaws that wanted to bite her through the window. Alicia jumped back, her heart pounding, and she realized she was holding her breath. It's just the apple tree, she reminded herself.

Staring out her window at the lashing rain, Alicia watched as the neighboring houses, already dark, seemed to grow even darker, as if a shadowy blanket were being lowered over Elm Street. Trees bent to the gusting wind. The wind shifted suddenly then, blowing a sheet of rain against her partially-open window. Water shot in, soaking her light cotton pajamas.

Alicia gasped as the cold water touched her skin. She slammed down the window and the storm was reduced to a gentle drone. Still, she continued to stare out the window, mesmerized. Through the relentless rain, the whipping wind, the pounding thunder, she could still hear the banging. Impossibly, it seemed even louder now, even though the window was closed.

Where the hell was that banging coming from?

Alicia opened her bedroom window again. An angry rush of wind chilled her to the bone through her wet pajamas. She leaned her head out, looking up and down Elm Street for the source of the noise that had awoken her.

It was coming from Evan Walker's house. Weird Evan Walker. Her neighbor. The butt of virtually every joke told at Springwood High.

Alicia saw a battered, black hearse progressing slowly down Elm Street like an ominous, dark torpedo. It was the only car visible. Even the few cars that were usually parked overnight had apparently found shelter elsewhere.

The hearse stopped in front of Alicia's house.

She wondered if Evan was driving it.

Evan's uncle owned a hearse. Evan often drove it to school. That was one reason why everyone called him "Weird Evan." Alicia acknowledged that her neighbor was a bit on the eccentric side, like the uncle he lived with. But no way was he totally weird. He certainly didn't deserve the cruel treatment her friends liked to dish out his way.

A tremendous crack of thunder startled Alicia momentarily, then her gaze returned to the hearse. She wondered if Evan might be spying on her. She knew he had a crush on her. Maybe he was trying to look into her window.

A small noise behind her made Alicia jump. She turned and saw her door closed, unchanged. She glanced at her digital clock just as it clicked to midnight. Why was she so nervous tonight? she wondered. Alicia had never been afraid of storms before. And she was such a heavy sleeper that storms usually didn't even wake her up.

Lightning flashed, illuminating Elm Street in an eerie, glaring glow. In that moment of brightness, Alicia saw Evan, skinny, bony Evan, walking purposefully down the street, apparently oblivious to the rain. He looked like he was drenched to the bone, but his eyes were glued to the sidewalk in front of him, and he seemed lost in a world of his own.

He was cradling a wet kitten in his arms, Alicia realized. Probably another stray, she thought. Evan had more than a dozen pet cats and he was always adding to his private menagerie.

As if he could sense her watching him, Evan glanced up at Alicia's bedroom window. Alicia quickly stepped back, hoping he hadn't seen her.

When she took a sidelong peek out the window again, he was gone.

But the hearse was still there. In front of her house.

Alicia strained her eyes, trying to see if there was a driver. She was able to make out a silhouette — someone wearing a big, floppy hat. Then the driver's window slowly opened.

Another flash of blinding lightning startled Alicia, her eyes closing in quick reflex. She rubbed them, then opened them slowly, an icy chill running through her rigid spine. The driver of the hearse came into focus and two empty eye sockets stared up at her, glowing with a diabolical light, like tiny, twin boilers alive with flames.

Then Alicia heard a sadistic laugh. It came to her in a wave and grew louder before echoing away again, as if sucked back inside a hideous mouth. Alicia wanted to run, but there was no place to go.

The car window rose again, then the hearse rolled down Elm Street and turned into Evan Walker's driveway.

Fixed with fear, Alicia continued to stare out her bedroom window, oblivious to the rain pelting her face.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you…" A children's play song she hadn't heard for years. Not since she was a little girl jumping rope with her Elm Street friends.

"Three, four, better lock your door…"

No! Freddy Krueger was dead and in hell. His body was ashes. Alicia knew this was true because her own mother had been part of the lynch mob that had burned the child killer to a black crisp.

So then who was driving that hearse?

And why had he stopped in front of her house?

Like a paper clip drawn to a magnet, Alicia felt an overwhelming compulsion to find out who was in the hearse. Her fear of a moment ago was replaced by a furious anger. She would not be intimidated by some perverted Peeping Tom. She'd find out who it was and call the police!

Alicia threw on some clothes and made her way down the stairs to the first floor of her house, careful not to waken her mother, who was a light sleeper. She grabbed her raincoat from the hall closet and pulled it on. Then she slipped out of the house and made her way down Elm Street to Evan Walker's house.

The rain had let up some by now, but the sky was still ominous with gray clouds that threatened to burst at any moment.

A ghostly sky, she thought.

As Alicia walked up Evan's driveway, she began to rethink her impulsive decision to follow the hearse. The rain was seeping through the seams of her raincoat. It still wasn't too late to turn around and race home, back to the comfort of her bed.

Alicia shivered — from cold or fear, she wasn't sure which. A million horrible thoughts crowded her brain. She knew that running home and hiding under the covers wouldn't really comfort her. Not while there was someone in a hearse watching her. Maybe even stalking her.

Her steps slowed as she approached Evan's garage. She lowered her head to peek into the garage door window, but it was grimy and covered with cobwebs. She couldn't see a thing. She wiped some of the dirt away with the sleeve of her raincoat and pressed her forehead against the filthy pane. Suddenly, she heard a crack near her — and felt the glass pane shake against her forehead. She jumped back with a start. A scream caught in her throat.

Then she heard it again. This time Alicia saw it. A rat leapt at her from behind the window, smacking its head on the pane of glass.

Alicia felt herself gag as the rodent bared its tiny, yellow, razor-sharp teeth at her.

Get a grip, Alicia commanded herself, struggling to get her breathing back under control. Then she heard soft laughter coming from the basement of Evan's house. Like someone laughing at a private joke.

Heh heh heh.

Or was it the wind?

Glimmering light emanated from the basement window. Someone *was* down there!

Her heart pounding, her body shivering and on the verge of collapse, she carefully made her way through the saturated lawn to the basement window. She peeked inside and saw a fire raging inside an old rusty boiler. A shadow moved in front of the boiler's open mouth — a man, tall, angular, feeding the fire. He wore a hat — the hat from the hearse. His back was to her, sharply outlined by the blazing light behind him.

He cackled wickedly and started to turn toward Alicia, slowly, purposefully. Alicia experienced dread as she had never felt it before.

Then, just as the man was about to reveal his identity to her, an alley cat shrieked loudly — painfully.

— Alicia bolted upright in bed!

A nightmare…
Or was it?

Chapter 1

That Sunday night, the rain continued to pour down on Elm Street.

Alicia Norris sat on the edge of her bed and tried to remember her dream. It had definitely been a nightmare — of that much she was certain. But try as she might, she couldn't remember any of the details. Her mind was a blank.

The window billowed her bedroom curtains and Alicia realized that the rain was coming in the window. She got out of bed and trudged across the floor. When she reached the window, she noticed first that the rug was drenched. Then she noticed someone standing in the shadows outside her house.

— Staring up into her window.

She yanked the shade down angrily and drew the curtain.

How disgusting! A Peeping Tom. Alicia peeked out the window. The guy was still there, lurking.

Alicia crawled back into bed, and pulled the covers up to her chin. She stared blankly at the window shade.

The shade snapped up.

Alicia jumped and cried out, startled.

The streetlight shone through the branches of the apple tree outside and cast shadows across the ceiling. Weird, scary patterns danced on the bedroom wall, above her life-size poster of James Dean. Then the wind gusted more heavily outside, and jagged clawlike shadows seemed to scratch at James Dean's eyes.

The rain was still coming in her window. Alicia got out of bed and walked over to close it. A single moonbeam broke through the rain clouds and shone down on Elm Street, and in that light she saw Evan, drenched from the rain, walking down the street. He was cradling a kitten in the folds of his jacket, only its knobby head visible.

Evan might be eccentric, Alicia thought, but there was obviously a kind side to him — at least when it came to cats.

Then the vague uneasy feeling she had felt after her nightmare returned.

Alicia slammed the window shut and turned the lock. Then she crawled back into bed, and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Monday morning.

Alicia sat at the kitchen table picking at her corn flakes. Her mother was at the kitchen sink washing the dishes, dressed as usual in her flimsy housecoat and worn-out slippers. Her hair was in curlers, as always, though Alicia couldn't understand why she bothered. Her mother never went out anymore. Not since Mr. Norris's heart attack. Mrs. Norris had become increasingly withdrawn since that fatal evening. Apathy swamped her like her oversized, threadbare bathrobe. For Alicia, waking each morning to find her mother so distant, so void, was like reliving her father's death again and again. She loved her mother dearly, and understood her mother's pain and loss. But for Alicia, the pain was twice as hard to bear. When she lost her father she knew she had also in effect lost her mother.

Alicia felt a familiar self-pity welling inside her. Thinking about her father's death and her mother's mental collapse never got her anywhere. Her seventeenth birthday was only a few days away, and that seemed fraught with its own problems. It was the day when Coach Wilson would choose the captain of the cheerleader squad, and Alicia's double cartwheel needed serious work. Alicia knew that no matter how hard she worked, her main rival, Ellen Sawyer, probably already had the position locked up. Ellen Sawyer would probably get the homecoming queen vote too. How could Alicia compete with a goddess?

Ellen was tall, blonde, beautiful, and athletic. And she had money. Why bother? Alicia wondered. It just didn't seem fair that one girl should have so much going for her. Of course, Alicia knew that she was attractive, too. At least everyone told her so. But compared to Ellen, Alicia considered herself too skinny, and kind of small and pale. And she hated the smattering of freckles across her nose.

Oh well, she thought. At least she had her artwork. Nobody could take that away from her. She had applied for a scholarship to an expensive art school, and she believed she had a chance of winning that. Go ahead and let Ellen become a professional cheerleader, if that's what she wanted.

Alicia rubbed her sleepy eyes. She stared at her mother's back and wondered if she should mention the nightmare. Why not? Maybe it would be the start of a conversation. The kind of conversation mothers and daughters were supposed to have when they had breakfast together.

"Mom?"

Her mother stopped her dishwashing but kept her back turned. Not a good sign, Alicia thought. But she persisted.

"Mom… I had this really horrible nightmare last night…"

— A horn blare crushed the still of the morning.

A coffee cup slipped from her mother's hand and fell with a crash. Mrs. Norris jumped back with a startled cry, then stared at the broken pieces for a long, blank moment. She turned toward Alicia, her face tight with that about-to-cry expression she often wore. Then she bent down to pick up the jagged shards.

"Careful, Mom, you'll cut yourself," Alicia cautioned. She ran to help her mother, help her to pick up the pieces —

— The horn blasted again.

"Who is blowing that horn?" her mother asked in a shrill voice.

"It's okay, Mom, it's just Scott. He's here to pick me up."

— The horn blared.

Alicia threw the broken pieces of coffee cup into the garbage and ran to the side door that opened to the driveway and leaned out. "Keep your shirt on!" she yelled to Scott. "I'll be right out!" So much for a conversation with Mom, Alicia thought as she ran back into the house and threw on her denim jacket. She grabbed her book bag and hurried to the kitchen to say goodbye.

There was a trail of blood across the kitchen floor.

"Mom!" Alicia dropped her book bag. "I told you to be careful." Alicia yanked the roll of paper towels down from above the kitchen sink and tore off a large section.

"It's only a small cut," her mother said, though the blood was dripping steadily, and she made no attempt to stop its flow. Alicia quickly wrapped the paper towel around the bloody finger and raised her mother's arm above her head. The paper seemed to suck even more blood out of the wound till it was red and dripping as well.

Scott hit the horn again.

"Why does he do that?" Mrs. Norris asked tensely.

Alicia wished she knew. If he didn't stop she was going to kill him, she swore to herself. "Is it bad?" she asked her mother as she applied pressure to the cut.

"I already told you it wasn't," her mother muttered with a pained expression.

"Are you sure?" Alicia asked.

Her mother mumbled yes. Hesitantly, Alicia lowered her mother's arm and let go of her bloody hand. She picked up her book bag then and glanced back one more time as she left to join Scott who was waiting impatiently in his clunky 65 Chevy Impala convertible.

Alicia wiped blood off her own hand onto the back of her jeans as she hurried over to the car. As soon as she caught sight of Scott, all thoughts of her mother were forgotten. Alicia was dating the most handsome boy at Springwood High, and she still could hardly believe it.

" 'Bout time, Ali," Scott said, as she slid into the front seat. He leaned over to kiss her, but she pulled away. Even though the sight of Scott was enough to weaken her knees, Alicia was still angry that he hadn't been more considerate and honked just once to let her know he was there.

"Uh oh," Scott said, putting the car into reverse and backing down the driveway. "What'd I do this time?" The convertible top was down, despite the dark storm clouds Alicia saw on the horizon.

Alicia was opening her mouth to tell him what was bugging her when a foul odor filled her nostrils. "Yuck! What's that smell?"

"It wasn't me," Scott said automatically.

Alicia suppressed a smile. It was hard to stay mad at Scott. Still, she thought she should stay mad at him for a little while. She tried to keep the frown on her face, which wasn't hard given the smell emanating from somewhere inside the car.

"So, what's bothering you this morning?" Scott asked, giving her a seductive look with his sapphire eyes.

"Your car stinks!" She reached for her seatbelt.

Scott shrugged. "It's an old car."

Before Alicia could fasten her seatbelt, Scott shifted into first and gave the car plenty of gas. The car shot forward and Alicia fell back against her seat.

Scott slammed hard on the brakes then and tires screeched as Alicia pitched forward, helpless.

She didn't even have time to scream as her forehead met the windshield.

Chapter 2

Scott shot out a muscular forearm to stop her momentum, but he was too late.

"Whoa," he said as the car stalled out. "Stupid cat," Scott cursed. "You all right?"

"Yeah," she said, though her heart was pounding and her head was already throbbing.

Then she saw the big black cat as it ran out from in front of the car and around to her side.

"Ignatius!" Alicia yelled at the sleek, black cat. "You almost got run over."

Ignatius stopped and looked back at her with an inquisitive green eye. Its other eye had been lost years ago in a fight with an alley cat.

"Is that ugly cat out of my way yet?" Scott asked, leaning over toward Alicia's side to look. He came so close to her that she could smell his Juicy Fruit chewing gum.

Suddenly he gave her a wet smack on the lips.

Alicia pushed him away. "Can't you ever be serious?" she asked. "I'm going to have a gigantic bruise on my head, and you almost hit Tiffany's cat." Tiffany Clark was Alicia's neighbor. They were also in the same class at Springwood High.

"That cat is so ugly I'd be doing Tiffany a favor." Then Scott laughed softly to himself. "It's probably trying to get away from Evan."

Alicia scowled. "Don't start." Scott was usually a nice guy, Alicia knew, but something about Evan brought out the mean streak in him. It was a side of her boyfriend Alicia didn't like to see.

Scott removed the wad of gum from his mouth, rolled it into a tight, dry ball, and flicked it away in the direction Ignatius had run.

"Why do you always pick on Evan?" Alicia asked, giving Scott a sour look. She didn't really expect an answer, and Scott ignored her question.

He restarted the car and slapped the stick shift into first. "Man, you're crabby this morning!" Then he hit the gas pedal, and they roared off.

He's right, Alicia realized. She did feel crabby. And it wasn't just because Scott had honked his horn more than once or Mom had cut herself.

Alicia rubbed her sleepy eyes. She really hadn't slept well. Maybe that was it.

They drove down Elm Street, past Evan's house. In the driveway the hearse was idling, the driver's door wide open.

The hearse… A fragment of Alicia's dream returned, then disappeared again. She glanced back over her shoulder to see if Evan was in the driver's seat, but the door of the hearse closed before she could get a good look.

"What were you saying before about Evan?" Alicia asked, trying to recall more of her nightmare.

"Huh?"

"Something about cats." An image of Evan holding a cat entered her mind. Had she really seen that last night, or only dreamt it, she wondered.

"Well… nah — I can't tell you. It's too sick." Scott's smile was a challenge.

"Get real, Scott. I'm not a baby," Alicia said with more confidence than she felt. Sometimes Scott really did gross her out — big time.

"You don't really want to know," Scott said with a shrug. "You told me once that you don't like to hear stuff like that."

"I said I don't like to hear people say mean things about Evan Walker. Especially things that aren't true," Alicia countered.

"Are you really sure you want to hear about it?" Scott smiled innocently.

Alicia paused. She knew Scott was baiting her, but she had to hear it anyway. "Yes," she finally said, then prepared herself for the worst.

"I heard Evan was cutting off cats' heads and sticking them on poles," Scott said matter-of-factly. "He has them stuck all over his backyard."

"That is such a crock of…" Alicia shook her head in disgust. Then she remembered something. "I know where you got that."

"Got what?"

"That story. It's from a TV special last week. There was a rumor about that serial killer Eric Betz, from when he was a teenager."

"Hey, I thought you didn't get into that kind of stuff."

"I don't. I was flipping through the channels and just happened to hear that part."

"Hey, I've got news for you, Alicia, that was no rumor," Scott said. "Betz was a sick dude."

"So you admit you saw it on TV?" Alicia persisted.

"Yeah. So what?"

"See — I knew it!" Alicia was triumphant. She had caught Scott in a bold-faced lie about Evan.

"Knew what?" Scott asked, feigning innocence.

"That Evan didn't do what you said he did. You started that rumor about him and the cats." Alicia was tight lipped. Evan wasn't exactly a "regular guy," but he certainly wasn't a serial killer, thank God.

"C'mon. The guy is definitely weird. Why else would he drive around in a *hearse?"*

Alicia shrugged. "Some people like antique cars. Besides, it's not even his car. It belongs to his uncle. And it probably runs better than this old rust bucket of yours," she said, giving the car interior a kick with her sneaker.

Scott winced as her foot hit the car. His eyes narrowed. "Just what is bugging you this morning?"

"Well, since you asked, I don't like you honking the horn so much when you come to pick me up in the morning. It scares my mother." Alicia ran her fingers through her windblown auburn hair.

"Everything scares your mother."

"Why can't you just wait till I come out? Or come in to get me?"

"Because then I'd have to talk to your mother."

"Ha, ha. Very funny." Alicia cringed. She knew her mother was in bad shape, but she hated the thought that her friends knew it too.

"Besides, Coach called an early practice and I'm in a hurry," Scott continued, oblivious to the hurt he'd just caused Alicia.

As they drove past Fred Krueger's old, abandoned house, Alicia thought again about her nightmare. Had she dreamt about Freddy Krueger?

Alicia noticed that the for sale sign in the overgrown front yard was tilted at an odd angle.

Who would buy that thing? she wondered.

No grass could possibly survive through the weeds, and no birds could possibly be interested in the withered, dead trees. It was a house only a rat could love.

A real eyesore.

Even if a potential buyer didn't know the history of the house, it looked so spooky and uninviting that she couldn't imagine any normal family showing interest in it. Not for long, anyway.

"Ali, I wonder about you sometimes," Scott said, out of the blue.

"You wonder about me?" Alicia said sarcastically. "Why? Because I'm the only one who sticks up for Evan Walker?"

"Yep."

"What's wrong with that?" Alicia asked defensively. But she was glad that Scott didn't answer. She really didn't want to fight with him. "Hey, there's Ellen and Johnny walking up the sidewalk," she said to change the subject.

Even in gray sweats Ellen looked gorgeous. She was probably on her way to the gym to work on her cheerleading routine for the audition.

Something I should be doing if I want to be captain, Alicia thought.

Most guys drooled over Ellen. In addition to her flowing blonde hair and bronzed body, Ellen had a gorgeous set of oval-shaped green eyes over perfectly shaped high cheekbones. The rest of her was well shaped, too.

Funny that Ellen couldn't do better than Johnny Murphy, Alicia thought forlornly, noticing that Ellen seemed to be checking Scott out.

"Didn't you say Miss Wilson is choosing a cheerleader captain this morning?" Scott asked, interrupting Alicia's silent fit of jealousy.

"Yes," Alicia said. "Ms. Wilson is choosing a captain."

"And Ellen Sawyer is your main competition, right?"

"Yeah. So?" Alicia asked, afraid of what Scott's opinion might be.

"So — why don't we just get rid of her?" Scott veered the convertible off the road and onto the sidewalk.

Alicia screamed as the car bore down on Ellen and Johnny.

Chapter 3

At the last moment, Scott cut the wheel and Johnny and Ellen jumped off to the side.

"What are you, nuts or something?" Johnny yelled angrily. He dropped his gym bag and in one quick step was at the car. Alicia saw a gleaming flash as Johnny whipped a switchblade from the pocket of his brown leather bomber jacket. In one smooth motion, he flicked open the blade and stuck the point of the knife right in Scott's face.

Alicia gasped. Her eyes were glued to the red dragon carved on the knife handle.

Johnny was a solid, stocky boy, a third-string receiver on the Springwood Night Owls football team. He had thick, black hair, and dark, sharply-chiseled features. A lot of girls seemed to find him attractive, but Alicia thought he looked like a weasel.

Johnny and Ellen had been dating for only a few weeks, but Alicia had a feeling that their relationship wasn't going to last much longer. Ellen liked to play the field, and Johnny was the jealous type. It was a dangerous combination. Alicia only hoped that Ellen's next conquest wouldn't be Scott.

Scott didn't flinch. "One day you're going to pull that little knife number on the wrong person, Murphy." Scott shut off the car's engine. Apparently he didn't care that he was parked on someone's lawn.

With a smirk Johnny put the knife away. Then his hand shot out as he tried to slap Scott playfully in the face. Scott batted his friend's hand away and the boys shadow boxed for a minute as the girls looked on.

"You're both crazy," Alicia said, relieved that the tense moment was over. "I thought you said you were in a hurry," she reminded Scott.

The boys finally stopped goofing around.

"Hey, you walking today?" Scott asked Johnny.

"No, we're *flying*, genius," Johnny said sarcastically.

"My MG's being tuned; I'm picking it up right after Ms. Wilson names the cheerleading captain," Ellen said, giving Alicia a sly look. "I don't know what's the matter with Johnny's heap this time."

"It's not a heap, it's a *Jeep*, and I'll have it running by tomorrow, all right?" Johnny said.

"But you were supposed to pick Boomer up," Scott reminded his friend. "We've got an early practice this morning."

"Why don't you guys just pool your money and get *one* car that runs," Alicia joked.

"Why don't you just walk everywhere from now on," Scott shot back.

Alicia was about to tell Scott off when she noticed Ellen smiling at him.

"So where's Boomer?" Scott asked Johnny.

"Probably still waiting for me to pick him up," Johnny said with a shrug.

"I'd better go get him," Scott said, glancing at his watch. "Coach will freak if Boomer's late for another practice." He started the car up. "See you later."

"Not if I see you first," Johnny countered, reaching into the car to flick Scott's nose. Scott swatted Johnny's hand away as the car roared off, leaving twin treadmarks on someone's neatly manicured lawn.

Scott glanced at his watch and gave the car more gas. The Chevy struggled to pick up speed. "I hope Boomer's not fooling around with Tiffany somewhere. We could both get booted off the team for being late."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Alicia said as she tested her seatbelt. "You and Boomer are his two best players. The coach wouldn't dare cut you from the squad."

"Maybe not, but I'll for sure have to do extra laps in full gear if I'm late. Not even star quarterbacks get a break."

As they raced back down Elm Street, Alicia spotted Boomer. "There he is!"

"Where?"

"Beating up Evan," she said, pointing to Evan's driveway.

Scott swung the steering wheel hard and the car shot up Evan's driveway. He hurtled himself out over the car door and ran over to where Boomer had Evan in a headlock.

"Let's break it up, dude," Scott said to Boomer, trying to pry Boomer's arm away from Evan's neck. "We're gonna be late for practice."

But Boomer was intent on what he was doing. With his free arm, Boomer shoved Scott away. Evan's face was turning blue. His eyes were

practically bugging out of their sockets. Evan gurgled as a length of pink drool dribbled out his mouth.

"Boomer… stop!" Alicia screamed. "You're killing him!"

Chapter 4

But Boomer didn't stop. Alicia bolted from the car and kicked Boomer in the leg as hard as she could.

Boomer dropped Evan like a sack of potatoes and grabbed his knee. "What'd you do that for!" Boomer bellowed at her. "That's the knee I had the cartilage taken out of." He limped up and down Evan's driveway trying to shake it off. His frizzy red hair bobbed up and down. "If you messed my knee up, Ali, I am gonna be some kind of serious pissed off."

"You were *killing* him!" Alicia yelled right back at him. "Can't you pick on someone your own size, you big ape?"

Boomer Harrison was solid as a brick wall. He was Springwood High's bullish fullback, a sizable chunk of beef, probably twice Evan's size.

Tiffany Clark stood a short distance from Boomer, wearing his letter jacket. Tiffany and Boomer had dated for as long as Alicia could remember. Tiffany was short, like Alicia, but more curvaceous. Like Alicia and Ellen, Tiffany was a cheerleader. She kept her dark curly hair cut ultrashort, like a model in *Seventeen* magazine. Dangling on top of her tight sweater was a silvery crucifix.

Alicia thought Tiffany and Boomer made an odd couple because of the difference in their sizes. But she supposed the same thing could be said about her and Scott.

Evan was lying on his back on the ground, still blue in the face, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

Alicia knelt at Evan's side and gently slapped his face, trying to revive him. "He can't breathe!" Alicia yelled. "Someone call an ambulance!" She'd never forgive herself if he died this way.

"Why don't you give him mouth-to-mouth, Ali," Boomer teased.

Evan rolled over on his hands and knees then, gasping in greedy lungfuls of air. He seemed to be okay.

"What is your problem, Boomer?" Alicia asked angrily; "Don't you get enough rough stuff on the football field?"

"My problem is *him,"* Boomer said, pointing a beefy finger at Evan. "That little creep made me fail my biology test."

Evan picked up his big, dark-framed «nerd» glasses and rose shakily to his feet. He examined the spectacles carefully before slipping them on.

"How'd he do that, big guy?" Scott asked.

"He knows Boomer copies off him, so he flunked on purpose so Boomer would flunk, too," Tiffany said.

"On *purpose*!" Boomer yelled. He flexed his damaged knee gingerly.

Scott shook his head sympathetically. "Did you really do that, Evan?"

Evan didn't respond, and Boomer made a move toward him. Alicia was afraid Boomer was going to hit him again. Evan didn't even try to get away.

Alicia wondered if Evan took secret pleasure in getting beaten up. He never defended himself. But then again, what chance would a nerd like Evan have against a boy twice his size?

"Come on, man," said Scott. "Let's get to practice." He patted Boomer's shoulder and climbed into the driver's seat. Boomer slid in opposite him, still massaging his knee.

"What happened to Johnny?" Boomer asked.

"Car trouble," Scott said.

"He could've called," Boomer complained.

"You know how he is," Scott said.

Alicia climbed into [he backseat with Tiffany. She glanced over at Evan who stared back at her with the look of a wounded animal. As usual, she felt sorry for him, but there wasn't anything she could do about it now. Or was there? No, not if she wanted to keep Scott.

"Later, Evan," Alicia said cheerfully as they backed out the driveway. Scott hit the horn.

"Adios, four-eyes," Boomer bellowed. "I'll see you after school." Boomer pointed his forefinger at Evan like it was the barrel of a gun, and pulled the trigger as they drove away. "Pow! You're dead!"

Driving down Elm Street, Scott was laughing. "That little guy is such a riot. You can stand there and pound on the dude all day and he won't do a thing. Won't even say a word. Some kind of masochist, if you ask me."

"I'd like to kick his head for a fifty-yard field goal," Boomer muttered. "I can't believe he failed that test on purpose just to mess with me."

"He knows his G. P. A. can take it and yours can't," Alicia said from the backseat.

"She's right, you know," Scott said. "It's his way of getting back at you."

"It worked, too. Coach Cuttler will bench me for a game — or more — until I get my grade back up."

"You know, Boomer, you didn't *have* to copy off him," Alicia pointed out. "Did you ever think of *studying*?"

Boomer glared over his shoulder at Alicia. He continued to rub his injured knee. "1 probably won't be able to play anyway since you've crippled me."

Scott took the next turn so quickly that the Chevy practically rode up on two wheels. Alicia was about to complain, but Tiffany beat her to it.

"I'd like to get to school in one piece, if you don't mind," Tiffany said, looking around her for a handhold. "Where are your seatbelts?"

"There aren't any in back," Scott said, zooming on ahead.

Alicia leaned close to Tiffany and asked, "Do you smell something funny?"

"It's horrible!" Tiffany said, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

Up front, the boys were talking about Evan again. Alicia eavesdropped on them as Tiffany covered her nose with a tissue.

"I'd watch out for him if I were you," Scott said to Boomer.

"Yeah, right," Boomer scoffed. "I am *so* scared of that little twerp."

"It's the quiet ones you gotta watch out for," Scott told him. "They're the ones who really wig out."

The houses along Elm Street whizzed by in rapid succession as Scott hurried to make practice. Alicia watched Scott gesturing wildly as he relived one of their past football victories.

As usual, he wasn't paying much attention to his driving.

"Look out!" Alicia shrieked as she saw the big, black hearse enter the intersection.

Scott hammered the brake pedal and the Chevy's tires squealed. The car shook with such violence that the trunk burst open.

The hearse bore down on them, its horn blaring.

The teenagers screamed at the top of their lungs as death in the form of several tons of steel rushed at them.

Chapter 5

But the hearse skidded to a halt just inches shy of the Chevy's front bumper.

For what seemed like ages, Alicia just sat in the car thanking her lucky stars that she would live to see another day.

In the front seat, Boomer was livid. "That's Evan's car!" he screamed, staring daggers at the hearse. "The little prick just tried to kill us!"

"Easy, Boomer," Alicia said with a shudder. "It was just an accident."

"Accident my ass," Boomer said, so angry his voice was trembling. He threw open the passenger door and bounded over to the hearse.

"Scott missed the stop sign," Alicia called to him. "It wasn't Evan's fault." She really wasn't sure whose fault it was, but it seemed like the right thing to say at the moment.

"She's right, big guy," Scott said. "Come on, let's go to practice. It was my fault, I was speeding, I missed the stop sign… What stop sign?"

"He's dead meat," Boomer said. He started yanking on the door handle of the hearse, but it was locked.

"Would you just leave him alone!" Alicia pleaded, though she knew she was wasting her breath.

Boomer's muscles rippled beneath his tight T-shirt. He kicked the door so hard with his thick-soled boot that he left a dent. A piece of chrome siding peeled away from the car and hung limply. Then he spat on the windshield.

"Scott! Do something, please!" Alicia begged.

"What do you want me to do?" Scott asked with a helpless shrug. "The guy's nuts."

"Call the police or something," she suggested.

"Sure thing. I'll just use my car phone and punch in 911 — oops — no car phone," Scott said flippantly, looking about the car. "Must've flown out the car when I missed that stop sign that doesn't exist either."

Boomer strode back to the Chevy and rummaged underneath the front seat, looking for something.

"Boomer, calm down, okay?" Alicia pleaded.

But Boomer ignored her. He pulled Scott's tire iron out from under the seat and plodded back to Evan's car, gripping the metal rod tightly in his hand. Alicia realized with a jolt that he was going to smash in the windshield of the hearse!

"Boomer — no!" Alicia shouted.

The hearse door cracked open and Evan's uncle climbed out.

Boomer froze.

Dr. Hawke was a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman with wavy, white hair and a carefully-clipped, white mustache. He wore a three-piece pinstriped suit. A slender gold chain disappeared into a small vest pocket. It was the type of suit Humphrey Bogart might have worn in an old gangster movie.

Like Evan, the doctor wore thick glasses, which magnified his dark eyes.

Alicia saw that a bag of groceries had spilled over on the front seat of the hearse.

The doctor solemnly eyed each of them, before turning his attention to the gob of phlegm that was slowly creeping down the windshield.

"Young man, you expectorated on my windshield," the doctor said to Boomer in a rich, deep voice. "And you've dented my door." He nodded at the tire iron hanging limply from Boomer's hand. "Now I suppose you intend to thrash me with that piece of metal?"

"N-no sir," Boomer said, dropping the tire iron with a clank onto the street. "I… ah… thought you were someone else."

"You thought I was my nephew, didn't you?" Dr. Hawke fixed on Boomer with his oversized eyes.

Boomer looked down at his own shoes. This was the first time Alicia had ever seen Boomer intimidated.

"I can still recall the way you harassed my nurses for lollipops every time your mother brought you in for a check-up. You were only two when you began, but you were a terror even then."

"He's much more mature now, sir," Scott joked, trying to break the tension.

Boomer stepped over to the hearse and tried to wipe his spit from Dr. Hawke's windshield with his bare hand.

"I have tissues," Tiffany declared helpfully, plucking a clean one from her purse.

"I've got it," Boomer said, using the tail of his T-shirt to clean the mess away. He kept glancing nervously at Dr. Hawke, as if he were afraid the old doctor could hurt him.

"There is too much permissiveness among the young in today's society," Dr. Hawke said, regarding Boomer with a dour expression.

Alicia silently wondered if she should just walk to school in the future.

"I'll send the repair bill to your parents," Dr. Hawke said, running his hand over the dents in the car. He climbed back in and slammed the car door with such ferocity that the chrome siding fell off and clattered to the ground.

As the hearse drove off and finally disappeared from sight, Scott leaned back in his seat and laughed loudly. "You *expectorated* on my windshield, *Mister* Harrison," Scott said, mimicking the doctor's bass voice. *"Permissiveness* in today's society…" Scott cracked up, unable to finish.

Boomer picked up Scott's tire iron and chucked it onto the floor of the Chevy.

"Close the trunk, will ya?" Tiffany said to Boomer, who stood silently by the side of the car.

"Boomer? Did you hear me?" Tiffany asked, annoyed that he was ignoring her.

"Don't worry about it," Scott said. "The trunk's broken. There's a trick to closing it. I'll fix it later." He glanced at his watch, then at Boomer. "Come on, big guy. Get in the car. We've got to boogie. You know, football practice."

Boomer climbed zombie-like into the car.

"I told you to slow down," Alicia reprimanded Scott. Maybe this near accident would teach him a lesson, she hoped.

"I know I was speeding, but that old codger missed the stop sign, not me."

"He looks as blind as a bat in those big glasses," Tiffany pointed out. "He probably didn't even see the stop sign."

Scott started the car and they headed for school. He looked over at Boomer, who was still oddly quiet. "You should've seen the look on your face when old man Hawke got out of the car. It was like you'd seen a ghost."

"I did see a ghost," Boomer said, his face as pale as snow.

"What do you mean?" Scott asked.

"He's dead," Boomer said emphatically.

"Who? You mean Dr. Hawke?" Tiffany asked in amazement.

"What are you talking about, Boomer?" Alicia asked him.

"My dad was just leaving his shift at County General last night when they wheeled Hawke in D. O. A. *Dead on arrival* — you catch my drift? The guy is *dead."*

Chapter 6

"Are you blind?" Scott said. "We just saw him."

Alicia's stomach churned. She remembered something from her dream. Something about lightning… and Evan's house.

"My father was positive it was Dr. Hawke," Boomer replied.

"Maybe he died and came back again," Tiffany said.

"Oooohhh…" Scott crooned in a spooky, monster-movie voice.

"Sometimes people die and come back," Tiffany said. "I mean, they're revived a short time later. Apparently it happens."

Scott reached over and punched Boomer on his thick biceps. "Snap out of it, man. Hawke was no ghost. He's just the same weird old dude he always was."

"I have a cousin who was blind and Dr. Hawke cured him," Tiffany said.

"Get outta here!" Scott said skeptically.

"Tiffany's right. Dr. Hawke was a big deal in his time," Boomer said.

"I would just kill myself if I went blind," Scott said. A sudden chill rattled through Alicia's body. She thought the art school she would be attending after graduation from Springwood High. Would life be worth living if she could no longer paint?

"Boomer's eyes were so bad, he was almost blind," Tiffany said.

Scott shot a glance at Boomer. "What's the matter with your eyes, big guy?"

"Nothing," Boomer said emphatically.

"Not anymore," Tiffany said. "But he used to wear these giant glasses and everyone called him *four-eyes.* That's when he started wearing contacts. And lifting weights."

Alicia laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Boomer asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"That's what you called Evan back at his house — four-eyes," Alicia said. "That explains it. You bully Evan because he reminds you of when you were a half-blind little kid yourself."

"He just gives me the creeps, okay," Boomer said. "They both do — him and his uncle. Did you notice how old man Hawke just sat in his car and let me go half nuts before he finally got out? It's the same with Evan, never fighting back. They play mind games with you. Weird Evan — I'd like to peel his scab, rub him raw, and make him totally lose it and never find it again."

"Did you know that Weird Evan poisoned his mother when he caught her with her lover?" Scott said with a straight face. "This was right after his father mysteriously disappeared."

Alicia groaned. Scott was doing it again.

"I never heard that one before," Boomer said, taking the bait.

"It happened like this," Scott said. "When Evan was a kid, his father ran off and deserted him and his mother…"

"Why?" Tiffany asked.

Scott paused to consider the answer. "Wouldn't you? I mean, if you had Evan for a kid?"

Boomer chuckled.

The Chevy hit a pothole, bounced high into the air, and came down hard on its shocks. The trunk flopped loosely on its hinges.

"He didn't live on Elm Street then," Scott continued. "He lived in a weird motel with his mother on the outskirts of town. Actually in a big, spooky house behind the motel. They owned the motel, but when the new highway was built it took all the business away. So it was just Evan and his mother living by themselves in this big, spooky, old house…"

This all sounded very familiar to Alicia. Where had she heard that story before… *"Psycho!"* Alicia exclaimed out loud, snapping her fingers.

Scott frowned.

"Who's psycho?" Tiffany asked.

"It's the Norman Bates story," Alicia explained. "You know, in the Alfred Hitchcock movie *Psycho.* I told you, Scott's always making up stories about Evan."

Scott shrugged as if to say "What's wrong with that?" as he turned the Chevy into the student lot at Springwood High and found a parking space. "We'd better hustle. We're only a few minutes late — Maybe Coach Cuttler will cut us some slack if we…"

"What do you mean *we*?" Boomer asked, walking with an exaggerated limp. "I've got to get to the nurse's office to have this knee looked at."

Scott rolled his eyes as he walked back around to the trunk. "I've got a feeling that knee's going to make a miraculous recovery right after I finish running extra laps for Cutt… Whoa!" Scott suddenly reeled back as thousands of flies swarmed out from his trunk like a black cloud.

The stench was overwhelming. Alicia felt nauseated. Scott's trunk was always a mess, but this was something else.

"Oh, I'm sick," Tiffany said weakly, backing away. "What kind of a bad joke is this?"

"Nobody's sweat socks smell that sickening," Boomer said.

Scott walked nervously to the front of the car and pulled out his varsity letter jacket. He came back around to the trunk then, and used the jacket to cover his nose and mouth.

Boomer grabbed him by the arm. "It's something dead under there," he said with all the certainty of an expert. "I know. I've smelled that before at County General. Sometimes my dad comes home smelling like that."

"Spare us the details," Alicia said, her hand shielding her eyes lest any of the flies go off-track in her direction. She looked at the grease-stained rag that was neatly spread out over a large lump.

"We should get the police," Tiffany said, her face pale. "We shouldn't touch anything. They'll find your fingerprints. This is serious."

"Come off it, Tiffany," Boomer said, straightening his neck and assuming the look of a football player immune to pain of any kind. "Do it, Scott."

Scott inhaled deeply behind the jacket, then leaned into the flies and lifted up the rag.

Alicia gasped. "Ignatius!" The creature was torn apart, its internal organs exposed in multiple places. She buried her face in her hands.

"It's not Ignatius," Scott said, using the know-it-all tone of voice that Alicia deplored.

"It's black. You can barely tell it's a cat. How do you know it's not Ignatius?" Alicia said.

"It's got patches of white and yellow."

"You can barely see them with all the blood," Boomer observed, once again the expert, trying to straighten things out.

Alicia made herself look again at the creature. "The flies are so thick," she said with a groan. Then she saw Scott doing the unthinkable. "Don't touch it!"

But Scott ignored her. He put his hand onto the scruff of the cat's neck. The spot that should have been soft and loose was stiff with dried blood. He held on anyway, and lifted the head of the cat, turning it so they could see the face.

"Oh, no," Tiffany said.

Alicia looked, five seconds that seemed like an eternity, long enough to permanently emblazen the horrible image on her brain.

The cat's eyes — both of them — had been torn out at the roots.

Chapter 7

When Alicia arrived at the cafeteria later that day for lunch, she still had the dead cat on her mind.

Of course Scott and Boomer had blamed it on Evan, which didn't seem fair. Scott's trunk was so easy to open that anyone could have stuck the thing in there. And Scott's jock buddies were always playing practical jokes on each other — some grosser than others. It was like a contest with them, to see who could outdo the others.

Ellen joined Alicia at the table with her lunch tray. She was wearing a short, tight, yellow-and-white-striped skirt that showed off her shapely figure and her long, muscular legs. Her luxurious, long blonde hair was tied back in a white ribbon.

"Congratulations, *captain.* You really wowed Ms. Wilson," Alicia conceded gracefully.

"Thanks," Ellen said, looking around the noisy lunchroom. "So where's Scott? Doesn't he usually sit with you at lunch?"

"I think Coach Cuttler has him running extra laps," Alicia replied nonchalantly. But she felt a knot forming in her stomach. Alicia didn't like to think of herself as the jealous type, but how else was she supposed to feel when Ellen wasn't even trying to disguise her interest in Scott.

Something near the big double doors caught Ellen's attention. Alicia supposed Scott had just entered the lunchroom.

But when she looked over to see, it was Evan who stared back at them. He was sitting by himself near where the trays were stacked — the table no one ever wanted — eating the mystery-meat meal of the day. On the table next to him stood something about two feet high, covered with a delicate, lacy-looking cloth.

Alicia wondered what it was.

Ellen averted her gaze. "I wish Weird Evan would stop staring at me like that," she said curtly. "It's like he's undressing me with his eyes."

Alicia knew that Evan was probably staring at her, not Ellen. Ellen was just too vain to think that any guy — including Weird Evan — might prefer Alicia over the new captain of the cheerleaders.

Ellen opened her little plastic cup of blueberry yogurt and dipped into it with a spoon. "Did you hear who Weird Evan is dating? — Mary Aldrich! The skinniest guy in the school dating the fattest girl in the state!"

Boomer and Johnny Murphy came sauntering into the lunchroom just then with a bunch of guys from the football team. They all had that arrogant jock swagger, looking cool. But Scott wasn't with them.

"Did you see Bozwell's pants?" Ellen asked Alicia. Mr. Bozwell was their biology teacher. "His pants were hanging so low I could see…"

"Uh, no, I didn't notice," Alicia interrupted, disgusted by the cheerleader queen.

The jocks walked toward Evan's table. Alicia followed them with her gaze, an uneasy feeling growing inside her.

"Hasn't that man ever heard of *a belt?"* Ellen said sarcastically. "I hate it when he sits on the edge of my desk — Hello? Alicia?" Ellen rapped her knuckles on the lunch table. "Anybody home?"

"Hmmm?" Alicia responded, her attention elsewhere. Boomer and Johnny and their pals were now clustered around Evan's table. A gathering of vultures.

"I said Bozwell's — what is the matter with you?" Ellen asked with exasperation.

Alicia watched as Johnny started to lift the cover off the thing next to Evan. Evan pulled the object out of Johnny's reach. When Johnny tried again, Evan smashed his lunch tray on Johnny's hand.

Heads turned at the hard, loud slap.

Johnny's hand was bright red.

The jocks ooohed, egging Johnny on.

"Are they picking on Weird Evan again?" Ellen asked. "How boring." But now she was watching, too. "What's that *thing* Evan has on the table?"

Johnny was behind Evan now, yanking up on his underwear. The wedgie made Evan topple forward. He caught himself on the edge of the table and kicked back at Johnny, but he missed.

"He kicks like a girl," one of the jocks shouted.

Alicia shook her head in disgust. Why did boys always have to fight? What did they have to prove?

Evan tried to kick Johnny again. This time he got him.

Alicia felt excited, happy, realizing this was the first time she had ever seen Evan fight back.

Johnny tried to knock over Evan, then Evan dove headfirst into Johnny's stomach. They collided into the stack of trays and knocked it over.

Chairs scraped back as an excited buzz shot through the crowd.

"Weird Evan Walker's getting his ass kicked," someone shouted. The whole cafeteria was up on its feet.

Ellen stood on top of the table to get a better look.

"Look out, Johnny!" she suddenly screamed. "He's got a knife!"

Chapter 8

The bell above Alicia's locker rang loudly, startling her. She tossed her books to the floor of her locker. The hallway was nearly empty now. Most kids were already in their classrooms, or rushing to get there. Alicia had a free period next so there was no need for her to hurry.

She needed to relax after the fight in the cafeteria. The incident had unnerved her. Fortunately, Mr. Bozwell had broken up the fight before anyone had gotten hurt.

Before Evan stabbed Johnny.

Before the jocks beat Evan to a bloody pulp.

She found her worn copy of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* on the top shelf of her locker and shoved it into the back pocket of her jeans. She'd find a quiet spot and read. She wanted to be alone and chill out.

Alicia checked herself out in the small mirror attached to the inside of her locker door. Critical brown eyes stared back at her. She should have done more back in the cafeteria.

It's not like I'm Evan's guardian angel or something, Alicia reminded herself.

She ran a hand through her unruly auburn hair — the hair that always looked like the wind had just destroyed it — and wondered what it would look like if it were blonde. Like Ellen's. She rubbed away a smudge of mascara underneath one eye, then straightened the brown-striped shirt she wore over a blue tank top that matched her jeans.

She played with her hair some more, trying a different look. But what she really wanted to do was to try on a different personality. A personality that wasn't jealous. A personality that would stand up for Evan even if it pissed off her friends.

She slammed her locker door shut in disgust and walked down the nearly empty hallway toward the back double doors that lead out to the parking lot. She'd find a sunny place to read. She turned a corner and two teachers hurried by, probably late for their own classes. She heard the sound of boys' voices rumbling up from the gym class downstairs.

The principal's office door swung open a few feet ahead of her. Mr. Bozwell walked out and hurried away.

Before the door closed she caught a glimpse of Evan. He was sitting by himself at the end of a long, hard, wooden bench, the mystery object beside him.

The door slammed shut then and Evan disappeared from sight.

Sudden feelings of guilt engulfed her. She realized that she had never actually spoken to Evan, not really. He had moved to Elm Street to live with his uncle after his parents had died. That was when he was about nine. In all those years, she had never had an actual conversation with him.

Now, she decided, was as good a time as any.

She tugged nervously at her hair and took a few more steps toward the principal's office. She opened the door just a crack.

Evan noticed her immediately.

The ceiling light reflected off his nerdy, black glasses. Even with those thick lenses, she imagined Evan's eyesight must still be pretty poor. Maybe the stare that unnerved so many of her friends was really just the blank expression of a boy who couldn't see more than a few feet past his own face.

"Alicia?" Evan called.

With a start, Alicia stepped back and closed the door.

So much for that idea.

She became angry at herself for being such a coward. Just what the hell am I afraid of anyway? she asked herself harshly.

Gathering her resolve, Alicia pushed the door wide open and tried to act casual as she wandered into the principal's outer office.

"Evan. Hi," she began.

Evan's mouth gaped open, but no words came out.

Alicia glanced around her, trying to maintain her facade of nonchalance. The outer office was deserted except for Evan and the thing at his feet covered by the lacy cloth.

Evan stared at her. Neither of them spoke.

Now what? Alicia wondered as the wall clock above Evan's head ticked loudly. She tried to think of something to say, to break the silence, break the tension she felt at being alone with Evan.

"You're not a dangerous criminal I shouldn't be sitting with, are you?" she joked.

Evan smiled. It was the first smile Alicia had ever seen on his face.

"Of course not," he said. He carefully moved the mystery object to the other side of his feet. "Please sit down," he added formally.

Alicia sat on the wooden bench next to Evan.

"As I'm sure you already know, I'm not much of a fighter. To be honest, I'm a bit of a coward…" Evan began.

Alicia was caught off guard by Evan's frankness. She felt a smile coming over her. "You did all right in the cafeteria," she said.

Evan laughed. His mouth stretched into a bitter gash. "The worm turned, I guess. It was worth it to watch Murphy's eyes bug out. I hate that guy. I hate them all."

Despite the rancor, Alicia found his words oddly eloquent.

"So, are they going to suspend you?" she asked.

Evan shrugged. "They're trying to reach my uncle now. I don't know. And I don't care."

Evan's uncle — the accident — *dead on arrival.* Alicia shuddered. She had to ask. "Is he okay? Your uncle."

"Yes. Why do you ask?" Evan said.

"Well, uh, Boomer said his father was at the hospital last night and your uncle was…" She couldn't bring herself to say the word *dead.*

"It was the lightning," Evan said. "A bolt of lightning struck our house about midnight. It must have hit our TV antenna or something. I was in the basement working. I heard a loud thump and rushed upstairs and found my uncle lying on the floor. Apparently his heart stopped on the way to the hospital, but they revived him after a few minutes."

"You mean he was dead? They brought him back from the dead?" Alicia asked, her eyes wide.

"I guess that's one way of looking at it. But at the hospital, one of the doctors explained that it wasn't a heart attack or a stroke or anything like that. His heart just stopped beating. But what was really strange was the way he looked early this morning when I went to visit him. He seemed healthier than ever. The doctors could find nothing wrong with him. His heart and blood pressure were normal — better than before. The doctors tried to convince him to stay for a few days of observation, but Uncle Manfred demanded to be released right away."

And a few hours later, he almost killed us, Alicia thought. "I'm glad to hear he's all right," she told Evan.

"He's fine. He'll probably outlive *me* now that the entire football team is trying to kill me." Evan removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. "Boomer and his buddies have been trying to get me for a long time." Evan pursed his lips. "Someone put a dead cat in Scott Martin's car trunk and they blamed me. And I *love* cats. They're a pack of wolves. But then you know that — you date one."

"It was probably Boomer himself who did it," Alicia said.

"If it was one of my cats, he'll pay," Evan said in a soft voice. "I'm counting heads when I get home." Evan was silent for a moment, then he said, "I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. You're one of the few people who's been decent to me."

Alicia noticed that Evan's glasses were misting up and felt uncomfortable with the emotional turn the conversation was taking. Her eyes wandered to the covered object at his feet. "What *is* that thing, anyway?" she asked with a self-conscious laugh.

"Just something I did for extra credit, since I failed the last biology test," Evan said, running long, slender fingers through his hair. Alicia noticed that Evan had chewed his fingernails down to the nubs.

"May I see it?" Alicia asked delicately.

Evan hesitated. "Well, I was saving it for biology class, but I guess it would be okay if *you* saw it first."

Alicia smiled in acknowledgment of the privilege he was about to grant her. She realized that during the very brief course of their conversation thus far, they had already developed a closeness that she and Scott would never achieve. Evan's sensitivity appealed to her, and she felt his total acceptance of her, something she had never felt before with another human being.

Evan hesitated only slightly, then with proud confidence carefully pulled away the cloth to reveal a clay model of a young woman. The model was anatomically correct, with a cutaway view displaying her internal organs: the heart, lungs, stomach, pancreas, liver, gall bladder, intestines, appendix, and ovaries.

Alicia gasped. The model was exquisitely crafted. A masterpiece. She marveled at the time, care, and talent it must have taken to create such finely detailed replica of the human body out of a cold lump of clay.

It was so lifelike.

It even had hair.

Windswept, auburn hair.
Just like her own.

Chapter 9

"So what do you think?" Evan asked, staring proudly at his creation.

"I'm… speechless," Alicia answered honestly.

Evan seemed pleased with her reaction. "Thank you."

"Evan… is that me?" Alicia had to ask.

Evan seemed genuinely surprised. "No! Of course not! It's — it's any girl!" He shrugged. "Oh — the hair. I just took a few snips from one of my tabbies. A nice touch, don't you think?"

Alicia smiled wanly.

Evan stifled a yawn. "Sorry. I was up all night finishing it. After I got back from the hospital." He sneezed. "When I wasn't walking in the rain, thinking… thinking about what I'd do without my uncle. He's all I have."

Alicia nodded sympathetically. It must have been hard for Evan, being an orphan.

Then Evan seemed to withdraw into himself.

Alicia glanced up at the wall clock — she was surprised at how quickly the half hour had flown by. She looked back at Evan, who was again gazing fondly at his clay girl.

She reached around Evan's shoulders and gave him a hug of encouragement. His shoulders felt bony beneath the threadbare, oversized Oxford shirt he wore. The shirt was probably a hand-me-down from his uncle, she guessed.

Alicia rose to leave. "It really is beautiful, Evan," she said, nodding toward the figure.

I only wish it didn't look so much like me.

Evan made it to biology class, after all.

On one hand, Alicia was glad they hadn't suspended him. But on the other, she knew that the football players would be looking for him after school. They'd surely want revenge for the dead cat in Scott's trunk.

Evan told her he wasn't involved, and Alicia believed him. Maybe she should call Dr. Hawke to come pick Evan up. But then she remembered the accident from that morning. She thought of a better idea.

She nudged Scott, who sat in the seat in front of her. "Can I use your car after school?" she whispered.

"For what?" Scott whispered back.

"I want to give a sick friend a ride home. I'll be back before football practice is over."

"Yeah, okay," Scott said.

Alicia nudged him again. He glanced back. "Your keys," she said.

He patted his pockets and came up empty. "I don't have them on me. They must be in my gym bag in my locker. Meet me at practice and I'll give them to you."

She nodded. That was one problem solved. But there was something else making her nervous. The clay girl. She turned to look at Evan who was sitting a few rows behind her. The clay girl, covered, was next to him on the floor.

It was an impeccable piece of work, which would mean absolutely nothing to Boomer and his friends. Or to the rest of the class, for that matter.

They would giggle and make fun of it, and of Evan.

And then they would notice that it looked like her, and the real fun would begin…

Alicia hoped Mr. Bozwell wouldn't get to it today. Then maybe she could talk Evan out of showing it. She'd try to persuade him that it was too wonderful to show to this class, to leave unattended in the display case.

She looked over at Mr. Bozwell. He was sitting up front on the edge of Ellen's desk, droning on about something. Ellen made a face behind Bozwell and several students grinned.

From behind her, Alicia heard soft snoring.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Evan had nodded off. His arm hung down beside him, his fingers gently touching the head of the covered clay girl.

Poor guy, Alicia thought, up all night, worrying about his uncle.

Evan snored a little louder.

Then he made a loud snorting sound.

Alicia glanced nervously over her shoulder. If only she could reach back and poke Evan. She noticed that Boomer, sitting across the aisle, was watching Evan the way a praying mantis stalks a wounded fly.

Boomer looked at Bozwell, and back to Evan. Then he reached across the aisle and yanked the cloth off Evan's clay girl.

Evan didn't stir from his sleep.

Boomer looked at the clay girl with a shocked expression. Then he put his hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh. He turned toward Alicia and raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Alicia looked away, embarrassed, and stared at the blackboard.

Johnny Murphy snickered. She glanced over her shoulder again. Boomer had scribbled something on a piece of paper and leaned it against the base of the clay girl.

Alicia took a closer look.

If said *Alicia.*

More snickers and giggles started to fill the room. Alicia tried to wish Evan awake, but he continued to sleep soundly.

Alicia swiveled face front again, feeling her face turn red-hot. She heard another laugh behind her. She snuck a glance over her shoulder and grimaced. Boomer had stuck a sharp pencil in the clay girl's head. She turned back in anger and saw that Scott was now looking at the clay girl with a big smirk on his face.

"Feel any pain in your head, Ali?" Scott whispered.

Alicia kicked the back of Scott's chair hard.

Someone behind her laughed *really* loudly.

Now heads were turning.

Mr. Bozwell paused mid-sentence when he finally realized he didn't have everyone's attention. He frowned and pushed himself off Ellen's desk, then walked sternly to the front of Evan's row.

Evan's head rested on the desk now, his forehead on a piece of notepaper.

Alicia half-listened to the scattered giggles from the class. She desperately tried to think of some way to help Evan — and herself — get out of this embarrassing mess.

"Mr. Walker!" Mr. Bozwell barked.

Evan snored loudly.

The class giggled some more.

"Mr. Walker!" Mr. Bozwell barked louder.

Evan snuffled and some drool escaped his lips.

Johnny Murphy jabbed him with the point of his pencil.

Evan sat bolt upright, the piece of paper stuck to his forehead. His eyes flashed open as the piece of paper fell from his forehead to the floor. Alicia

heard him gasp when he saw his clay girl with the pencil jammed in her head. Evan yanked the pencil out and hurled it across the room.

It struck Mr. Bozwell right in the face, then clattered to the floor.

A hush swept over the classroom.

"Hey Weird Evan," someone said. "Where'd you find a girl that small to embalm?"

The class burst out laughing.

"It's a tiny Alicia," someone else said.

Alicia cringed as laughter filled the room. She watched as Evan grabbed the piece of paper with «Alicia» written on it and angrily crumpled it up. Then he covered the clay girl again.

Boomer picked something up off the floor. It was the piece of paper that had been stuck to Evan's forehead. "Hey, check this out. It's a love letter from Evan." A wide grin creased his broad face. "To *Alicia*!"

Evan shot out of his chair to grab the letter.

Then suddenly collapsed, hitting the floor with a sickening thud.

Chapter 10

Silence gripped the classroom.

Evan was out cold.

Then some kids giggled again.

Alicia felt a hot pain yank at her intestines. She wanted to yell at everyone, to scream at them, to help Evan off the floor.

But she just sat there.

Sat there staring at the floor, out the window, at the second hand swirling around the wall clock. Wishing she were somewhere else — anywhere else.

Evan stirred. Slowly, he pushed himself up into a sitting position. Alicia and the rest of the class watched him as he looked at his feet and saw that someone had tied his shoelaces together. He untied the shoes, then retied them…

Suddenly he reached over and snatched the love letter from Boomer. Surprised, Boomer tried to snatch it back, but Evan shielded it with his body. Then Evan pushed Boomer so hard, he lost his balance and fell out of his chair.

The class laughed.

Boomer's jock buddies in the back row razzed him about being pushed around by a nerd.

Mr. Bozwell walked down the row and stood before Evan.

"You were already in one fight today in the cafeteria. You almost took my eye out with that pencil," Mr. Bozwell said to Evan, rubbing his forehead where the pencil had struck him. "Now, isn't that enough?"

"He had a knife, too, Mr. Bozwell," someone said. "In the cafeteria. But he dropped it when he saw you coming."

"I'm requesting right now to have my seat changed, Mr. Bozwell," Boomer said indignantly. "As you can see, Evan is quite violent. He could hurt me! The boy's a menace."

Guffaws from the crowd.

"And he writes pornography," Boomer added, pointing to the piece of paper Evan still clutched tightly in his hand.

"Perhaps you should read your little love letter to the entire class," Bozwell said to Evan. Alicia couldn't believe her biology teacher would be so cruel. Maybe he was mad about being hit with the pencil.

Evan pressed the letter against his desk to smooth out the crinkles. Then he quickly stuffed it into his mouth.

A few pockets of nervous laughter tittered through the classroom.

"What's he doing?" someone asked.

"He's *eating* the letter!"

"Now that's weird!"

His mouth still full of half-chewed paper, Evan walked down the row, brushed past Mr. Bozwell, and walked out of the classroom, slamming the door behind him.

Alicia rose from her desk and walked out the door without bothering to ask Mr. Bozwell for permission to leave. Enough was enough. The noise of the classroom diminished, then clicked off completely as the classroom door closed shut behind her.

She hurried down the hushed hallways looking for Evan. This was her chance to redeem herself. She'd be a true friend to Evan.

As she passed a dark, empty classroom, she heard a chair squeak and scrape across the floor. Was that him?

Down the hall she heard a typewriter clacking away, probably in the reception area of the principal's office. She paused, then cracked the classroom door open and peeked inside.

Strange shadows passed through the partially drawn blinds and fell upon rows of abandoned desks. In the odd lighting, they made Alicia think of rows of tombstones. Was Evan behind one of them?

"Evan?" she called softly. But no reply broke the deathly quiet of the room.

"Evan?"

Alicia heard something creak.

"Evan?" she whispered. "I know you're in here."

She slipped into the classroom. When the door closed behind her it was darker than before. Her hand went to the light switch, but then she thought better of it. Someone might notice.

She heard a soft sob. Then another.

Alicia crept silently up and down the rows of desks looking for Evan. She finally found him huddled under a desk, rolled into a ball like a

wounded animal licking its wounds under a bush.

Tears streamed out from behind Evan's thick glasses and rolled down his cheeks. Alicia placed a hand gently on his shoulder. She felt so sorry for him, it was breaking her heart.

Evan was a strange boy.

A strange, hurt boy.

But he was also a boy in need of help.

"Evan, let's get out of here," she said. "I'll take you home."

"No," he said, a sob catching in his throat. "I like it right here. It's safe here."

Alicia heard footsteps in the hall and looked up. A dim form passed the frosted glass of the classroom door and continued down the hall.

"Evan… don't let them find you like this," she said. "Don't let them see they can get to you. That's just what they want. Don't give them that satisfaction." Alicia knew that if the football players found Evan and her together like this, both their lives would become hell.

Evan stopped crying.

Alicia continued, "When the bell rings, give the halls some time to clear and then meet me behind the stadium, by the concession stand. I'll give you a ride home, okay?"

No answer.

"Okay, Evan?" she asked quietly.

"Will you go back to Bozwell's class and get my clay girl?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "I will…"

The bell ending the period jangled loudly and both Alicia and Evan jumped. Then they laughed. Alicia brushed back a strand of Evan's hair. "I'll meet you by the north end of the stadium, okay?"

"Okay," Evan said.

Alicia slipped out of the classroom. The hallway was already clamoring with students eager to break free from school as she hurried back to Mr. Bozwell's class.

She opened the door slowly, checking to make sure everyone had left. She didn't want to face her classmates just then. She'd just retrieve Evan's biology project and go.

But when she stepped inside, she gasped.

The clay girl was gone.

Chapter 11

Alicia waited for Evan at the north end of the football field, near the snack bar and the row of pay phones.

Unfortunately, she was also near the locker room doors. She wished she had named a better place to meet Evan, but she had felt so panicky back in the dark classroom that she hadn't thought clearly.

In the distance she spotted Evan walking toward her.

Oh, no. The timing was all wrong. She had wanted to get Scott's car keys and maybe find out what had happened to the clay girl before Evan arrived.

Too late!

She glanced nervously at the door to the locker room. She had already sent a guy in to get Scott. She glanced back at Evan, realizing she had led him right into danger. If the football players saw him… Alicia didn't want to think about what condition he would be in after they finished with him.

Alicia walked briskly toward Evan, glancing nervously over her shoulder as a group of players in pads and cleats came out of the locker room door. If she could reach Evan before anyone else saw him, perhaps they could avert a disaster.

She saw Ellen and Tiffany way over by the fence, sitting on the hood of Ellen's MG and talking to Charlie Chadwick, Springwood's biggest linebacker. Alicia hoped they wouldn't notice her. Charlie was one of Alicia's least favorite people. He had a mean streak which was most visible in the practical jokes he played on his so-called buddies. A lot of his pranks were grade-school stuff, like sprinkling salt on chewing gun. But Alicia remembered one time when he had actually slashed someone's tires — and it had been one of his friends.

Evan's smile grew wider as she drew closer, the sun glinting off his big, black glasses.

Alicia thought it was odd that the nephew of an eye doctor couldn't manage to get a better-looking pair of glasses. As she considered just how nerdy they really looked, the sky darkened and the reflective lenses turned into two black holes. Alicia glanced up at the fast-moving clouds drifting across the sun, sending a shadow across the tarmac toward Evan.

Then something sailed over Alicia's head.

Fast as a bullet it headed straight for Evan.

It struck him flush in the face and rebounded crazily to the ground.

A football.

Evan fell to the ground, his face in his hands, his shattered glasses on the ground ten feet from him.

Alicia spun around angrily, as Scott jogged toward her in his long, easy strides.

"Teach that little twerp to stick dead cats in my car," Scott muttered as he approached her, his cleats clicking over the gritty tarmac surface, shoulder pads bulging underneath his practice jersey.

Evan lay motionless, crumpled on the ground. His hands covered his face.

"Hi, Ali," Scott said as he stopped by her side. "I got the keys."

Alicia ignored Scott and ran to Evan. Scott ambled after her. Alicia helped Evan up. Scott grimaced when he saw the damage he had done.

Evan's face was terribly bloody. Alicia pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at a cut near his eye.

Scott picked Evan's glasses up off the ground, and Alicia snatched them from him. The frames were bent and a lens was cracked. She handed them to Evan, who slipped them on despite their condition. They sat crookedly on his nose.

"You could've knocked his eye out, you idiot!" she yelled at Scott. The gash over Evan's eye was nasty, and Alicia wondered if he would need stitches.

Scott looked sheepish. "I didn't mean to hit him."

"Yeah, right," Alicia said angrily. "The star quarterback made a wild throw."

Alicia picked up some pens that were scattered on the ground, and put them back into the plastic holder that had fallen out of Evan's shirt pocket.

"Hey, dude, I'm sorry, all right?" Scott said to Evan. In the distance, Alicia saw Charlie Chadwick loping toward them — probably planning to show off his brawn to Tiffany and Ellen by getting into a fight.

"Honest, I didn't mean to hit you in the face. But you shouldn't have stuck that dead cat in my car," Scott said.

"He didn't do it," Alicia protested.

"Yeah, right," Scott responded sarcastically. Then he turned back to Evan. "Just admit it, and I'll forget about it. We'll pretend it never happened. Just admit it. Because the next time you do something like that, I'm gonna pound the crap outta you," Scott said.

Evan stared silently at his shoes, the bloody handkerchief pressed to his face.

"You're not going to do anything," Alicia declared to Scott.

"Are you going to admit it or what?" Scott asked Evan, ignoring Alicia.

"Yeah, admit it," Charlie repeated, jogging up to them. "Before I rip your legs off and make you eat them."

"And you know Charlie can do it," Scott said to Evan.

"Admit it or say your prayers," Charlie snarled.

Scott and Charlie, standing side by side in their shoulder pads and cleats, looked even taller and more broad-shouldered than they normally looked — and they normally looked pretty big. Next to the two jocks, Evan looked like a dwarf.

"Why do you always have to bully him?" Alicia asked, exasperated. "You never let up."

But the boys continued to ignore her. Like dogs who smelled blood, nothing would stop them from getting their prey.

"I'm waiting — spaz!" Charlie growled, taking a generous handful of Evan's oversized shirt. A button popped off. Charlie lifted Evan into the air with one hand. "Admit what you've done or prepare to die!"

Chapter 12

Charlie shook Evan, and several more buttons flew into the air.

This was all her fault, Alicia thought miserably. If only she had picked an out-of-the-way spot for them to meet. She looked around for help.

But who would help a nerd like Evan?

"Please put him down, Charlie," Alicia pleaded.

But now Charlie just kept shaking Evan. Evan's glasses hung from one ear now. "So? Are you going to admit it? Or is it time to kiss this life good-bye?"

"Yeah," Scott yelled, caught up in Charlie's blood frenzy. "Admit it!"

"You guys…" Alicia said, feeling helpless.

Evan hung limp in Charlie's massive arms. His glasses slipped down, then fell completely off his nose.

"Are you going to admit it?" Charlie asked. "Last chance!"

"No!" Evan screamed.

Charlie smiled and dropped Evan roughly to the ground.

Evan stood up with what Alicia thought was a surprising amount of dignity. He dusted himself off, picked up his damaged glasses and slipped them back on.

"Okay, then I guess *I'll* have to admit it," Charlie said.

"Huh?" Scott said.

"*I* put the cat in the trunk of your car," Charlie said, a long grin creasing his face.

Scott was stone faced.

"Chadwick, you are such a jerk!" Alicia yelled.

Charlie's grin grew wider, revealing a missing front tooth. "You are so *easy,* Martin," he said with a laugh. "I had you going from here to nowhere."

Scott kicked Charlie's football helmet clear across the tarmac. "I'm gonna kick your ass for this, Chadwick."

With lightning speed, Charlie's hands shot out and secured Scott in a wrestling hold, lifted him from the ground, and dangled him helplessly in the air.

"You gonna kick my ass now, Martin? Huh? Huh? You gonna kick my ass!" Charlie was yelling, red in the face.

Alicia looked away. Watching her boyfriend hanging like that was a real embarrassment. She saw Evan walking away. He was almost to the concession stand.

"Evan," she called. "Wait up!"

But Evan kept walking.

"Evan!" she called again.

But he never even turned around.

* * *

"Two fights in one day!" Ellen said to Tiffany, her face flushed with excitement.

Johnny Murphy was beginning to bore her. How many Jean-Claude van Damme movies could one girl be expected to sit through, anyway?

She climbed up on the hood of the MG to get a better look. Ellen couldn't believe her good luck.

She had her sights set on Alicia's boyfriend, of course. She hadn't thought that beating Alicia out for cheerleading captain would help her to win him over. But now, by standing up for Evan, Alicia was practically pushing Scott into her open arms. All Ellen had to do to help the process along was exaggerate a little.

"There hasn't been this much excitement in Springwood since…" Ellen suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, her mouth gaping.

Tiffany shot her friend a puzzled look. "What…?"

Ellen's face filled with terror.

"Ellen — what's wrong?" Tiffany asked.

"I thought I saw… I thought I saw…"

Ellen's face twisted with horror and a chill ran up Tiffany's spine.

Chapter 13

Tiffany crawled up on the car and followed Ellen's gaze across the tarmac. Her heart was pounding, her palms sweating, her senses swirling, fully expecting to see some truly unimaginable sight, something so reprehensible and repulsive it would make her hurl.

Instead she saw Alicia and Evan.

"Alicia just kissed the geek!" Ellen said in horror.

"Oh." Tiffany groaned. "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough? He was staring at me all through lunch period today. That guy is creepy with a capital C!"

Tiffany looked back to Alicia and Evan. Evan was fumbling with his glasses, which appeared to be broken. Even though she and Alicia were friends — and she was always willing to give a friend the benefit of the doubt, Tiffany couldn't imagine what Alicia could possibly see in Evan. Why was she always defending that weirdo? Evan made Tiffany nervous — she wished he didn't live so close to them on Elm Street. If only Evan and his equally-weird uncle would move to another part of town… or, even better, another part of the world.

"Hey, I have an idea…" Ellen said. Her eyes glowed wickedly. "I know how we can teach Weird Evan a lesson."

Tiffany's eyes narrowed. "This idea wouldn't have anything to do with that clay thing Johnny stole from Bozwell's class, would it?"

Ellen's answer was a crooked grin.

Tiffany looked back at Evan.

Poor bastard.

Chapter 14

Evan crossed the stadium parking lot and headed for Elm Street, for home. He had taken enough punishment for one day.

When would it stop?

When?

Never! He knew that as sure as he knew his name. He knew it even if the voices in his head didn't keep telling him the same thing.

He walked along the sidewalk keeping his eyes glued to the ground, his head whirring with thoughts. Evil thoughts. Dark voices chattered inside his head. Voices he had been trying desperately to shut out. Voices that had been growing louder and louder every day.

Evan used to think the voices were his dead parents giving him advice and encouragement from the grave. But not anymore.

The bullies were winning.

When would it end?

Never! repeated the dark voices from inside. *Not till they're dead. Not till they're all dead!*

They were all his enemies. Everyone and everything. Except his uncle. And his cats. And maybe Alicia.

But even friends had to be punished sometimes when they misbehaved. Punished like unruly children.

He heard the purr of a finely-tuned engine and his head shot up. Were they coming for him? He saw a convertible rolling down the street toward him. Scott's? No, a small MG. What would it be this time? Water balloons? Black ink in a squirt gun?

The afternoon sky had turned dark and gray, the air wet and heavy. Pregnant clouds hung low.

The MG pulled up alongside him.

In the two-seater were two cheerleaders. Evan recognized them: Tiffany Clark and Ellen Sawyer. Two girls that any guy at Springwood would die to have.

Even Evan.

"Evan," Ellen called with a friendly wave, getting out of the car.

Evan swallowed hard. If the blonde goddess was being nice to him, she must have something diabolical in mind, he figured.

Evan eyed Ellen suspiciously as she approached him.

"Hi," Ellen said, showing perfect white teeth.

"Hi, Evan," Tiffany said with a friendly wave.

"Hi," Evan said warily to the two girls.

What did they want with him?

Ellen's face suddenly filled with concern. "Evan… what happened to your eye?" She took the handkerchief from his hand and gently dabbed at the bloody gash.

"You didn't see?" Evan asked.

"See what?"

"What Scott did to me."

"Scott did this?" Ellen asked in fake disbelief. "What a brute."

"Yeah, well," Evan mumbled nervously.

"Was it over the cat thing?"

"Yeah."

"But you didn't do it?"

"No. No way."

"Charlie Chadwick did it," Tiffany said from the car.

"You know?" Evan asked.

"Yeah, he told us," Tiffany said. "He was bragging about it, actually."

"It wasn't one of mine, was it?" Evan asked, worried.

"He said it was just roadkill," Tiffany said.

"But you got blamed for it, as usual, right?" Ellen asked with a false sympathetic nod.

"Yeah," Evan said. "As usual."

Ellen pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen into Evan's wound. "These things have a way of evening out, you know."

"Yeah," Evan agreed. What did she want? Why was she playing with him?

"You know…" Ellen said, gently turning the conversation. "I think Alicia might have a thing for you. I know she's just about finished with Scott Martin."

"Scott is such a total jerk," Tiffany said, nodding her agreement from the car.

"Anyway, we're having a surprise birthday party for Alicia tomorrow night and we want you to come," Ellen said.

A distorted smile crimped Evan's face. "I don't think I would be welcome…" he started to say.

"It's at Tiffany's house, and whoever she wants to come is welcome." Ellen glanced at Tiffany. "Right, Tiff?"

"That's right, Evan," Tiffany said. "And it's just down the street from where you live, you know, so if it isn't happening for you, you can always split."

"Interested?" Ellen asked, running a finger into the top buttonhole of his shirt.

Evan hesitated.

"No one's going to do anything to you in my house," Tiffany assured him.

"And I know Alicia would *love* to see you there." Ellen tucked the bloody hanky into Evan's ripped shirt pocket, next to the plastic pencil holder. Her perfume was sweet to his nostrils.

"So you wanna come?" Tiffany asked, stretching in the car with her arms high over her head. Stretching like a lazy cat. Sunlight glinted off something she wore around her neck. A crucifix.

"I guess," Evan said. What did he have to lose? He realized he was staring at Tiffany. He looked back at Ellen who was all smiles.

"It's tomorrow night at eight," Ellen said. "But don't come too early, okay? Because we'll be setting things up."

"What should I bring?" Evan asked. He had never been to a party before.

"Roses," Ellen said. "Alicia loves roses."

Evan thought for a moment. He had never bought flowers for anyone. "Where can I get them?"

"I'll show you," Ellen said. "We're driving that way. C'mon, we'll give you a lift."

Evan glanced at the MG. "There's only room for two."

"Then I guess I'll just have to sit in your lap," Ellen said suggestively.

Ellen took Evan by the arm and led him to the car.

Evan didn't protest.

Not even when his eye started to bleed again.

* * *

A day after the football-throwing incident, Alicia still couldn't get Evan's bloodied face out of her mind. She should have helped him home, at least.

And what was worse, the friends she usually could count on seemed to be turning their backs on her. They thought she was a jerk for trying to help Evan. Her best friend Tiffany seemed to prefer hanging out with Ellen now — Ellen the flirt. And certainly Scott was fed up with her. Alicia still loved Scott — he was a good guy, not like Boomer or Charlie. But even Scott was needling her a lot about Evan.

Alicia was finishing up the dinner dishes. Her birthday dinner dishes. Some party. She and her mother had eaten together in almost total silence, both of them thinking about how much fun birthdays had been when Mr. Norris was still alive. He had always been the life of the party — even when it was just the three of them. Alicia felt the tears welling up again and bit her tongue to keep from crying.

Mrs. Norris had already gone to bed, even though it was only seven-thirty.

"Snap out of it!" Alicia commanded herself. As always, when she felt herself slipping into self-pity, she imagined her father in the room with her, and felt a warm glow spread through her body. She still loved her father as she had when he was alive. Before…

The telephone shattered her thoughts. She quickly picked up the receiver before her mother would be disturbed.

It was Tiffany. And her voice was hysterical.

"Alicia — get over here right now!" Tiffany's voice screamed out from the phone. "Evan Walker is in my backyard with a hatchet. And he's threatening to kill Scott with it!"

Chapter 15

Alicia's heart was pounding. I knew it, she screamed inside herself. I knew this would happen someday. She tried not to panic. "Did you call 911?"

"I called already," came Tiffany's shaky voice. "Oh no! I can see them from the kitchen window. They're over by the pool — Evan! No! Don't! Alicia, Evan's swinging the hatchet at Scott. Get over here — Now! Evan will listen to you."

The line abruptly went dead.

Alicia stood frozen, the phone still glued to her ear. A voice inside yelled Go! And she dropped the phone and raced out the kitchen door to Tiffany's house.

Alicia expected to hear screams as she neared the big pool that dominated the Clarks' backyard. But she was greeted with an eerie silence. She listened for approaching sirens, but heard only the chirping crickets.

'Tiffany?" Alicia yelled. "Scott! Evan!"

No one answered. Alicia made her way slowly around the perimeter of the pool. Dead bugs and brown leaves from an autumn-stripped tree floated on the surface of the water.

Then she saw him. Behind an inflatable mattress. Scott was slumped against the pool.

There was a hatchet stuck in his head.

His eyes were wide open with a terror-filled stare and blood was pouring down the front of his face and onto his ratty T-shirt. More blood was splattered on the ground near the pool.

Alicia thought she might puke.

A cold gust of wind picked up dead leaves and rattled them across the backyard.

Alicia shot a frightened glance over her shoulder.

Where was Evan? Where had he gone? Was he hiding behind a tree? Behind the pool? Was he in the house looking for another weapon? Where?

Was he up in the tree?

She looked up!

No.

No sign of Evan perched in the tree branches.

No sign of Evan anywhere.

Just the whispering wind. The skittering of dead leaves.

Then Scott began to gurgle.

He was still alive!

She ran to him, but froze when she got close. She should have felt relieved that he wasn't dead, but instead she felt revolted. He looked so ghastly…

Scott's hand suddenly shot out and grabbed her ankle.

A scream ripped out of Alicia's throat. "Agghhh!"

The grip around her ankle tightened, so strong, like steel — she couldn't break free. She screamed again as Scott pulled her toward him. He reached up with his other hand and pulled her down.

Alicia screamed and screamed again.

A scream to wake the dead.

Scott pulled her to the ground next to him and kissed her. Then he laughed.

With a mighty heave, Alicia broke free and scrambled to her feet. Scott grinned up at her, still laughing. Laughing so hard tears poured from his eyes.

"Surprise!"

They came from behind the trees, from behind the bushes, from out of the kitchen. Tiffany, Boomer, Ellen, Johnny, friends from school — all laughing.

"Happy Birthday!" Tiffany shouted to Alicia, over the laughter, a huge grin across her face.

And then Alicia discovered she was laughing, too. She felt tears of relief spring to her eyes.

Those creeps. They really had her going.

Scott climbed to his feet and removed the ketchup-covered fake hatchet from his head. He tossed it into the pool with a smirk, then covered up quickly as Alicia jabbed him hard in the ribs. "I could kill you!" She looked at the grinning, laughing faces. "All you guys!"

"Come on, baby, chill out," Scott said, puckering his «bloody» lips for another kiss.

Alicia pushed him away. "Go change before you get that gook on me." Scott giggled and walked toward the house, but not before dabbing some

ketchup on Alicia's nose.

Alicia wiped the red blob away with her hand. She shivered, suddenly realizing how cold she was. She had run out of her house in just a T-shirt and jeans, and the fall night air was growing frosty cold.

"Happy birthday, Ali," Johnny said as he walked over to her with a beer in his hand.

"Thank you," she said, suddenly feeling self-conscious. She crossed her arms over her chest. From somewhere inside the house music boomed on, raising a cheer from the crowd. Dancing broke out in the backyard.

"Happy Birthday," Charlie Chadwick said, joining her. A quart bottle of beer dangled from his meaty paw.

"Thank you," Alicia said, wondering how Tiffany had gotten rid of her parents. "I hope Tiffany's cat is safe around you."

Charlie laughed. "I told you I found the thing dead in the street. I wonder what happened to its eyes?" Then he said, "So where's your other boyfriend?"

"What *other* boyfriend?" Alicia asked, waving the smelly alcohol fumes away from her face.

"Weird Evan."

"Very funny," Alicia said. She really wasn't in the mood to be teased about Evan.

Inside the house someone turned up the music.

Tiffany appeared at Alicia's side. "Hey — you have goosebumps running all up and down your arm."

"I know," Alicia said. "I'm freezing. Do you have something I can put on?"

"There might be a clean sweatshirt or something in my dresser drawer," Tiffany said.

Alicia nodded and headed for the house.

The music was even louder inside, where a separate crowd had gathered. It felt like the walls were shaking. Sitting near the TV with a joy stick between his legs was Boomer. He looked up when he saw Alicia heading for the stairs. "Ali — happy birthday!"

"Thank you," she said with a little wave.

"Hey, come here for a moment, would ya!" Boomer shouted over the crowd noise and the music. "There's something really important I got to ask you — hurry!"

Alicia squeezed past two jocks on the football team who didn't give her much room to get by. They leered drunkenly as she passed. It seemed like all the guys had beers. Alicia had a feeling it was going to be one of those nights.

And all in her honor…

"Hurry up, Alicia!" Boomer shouted to her. "He's killing another one!" Boomer pointed to the TV screen with the joy stick. "How do I kill Bundy?"

"Huh?" Alicia asked, staring at the screen with a puzzled expression. A tiny figure was dashing across the screen chasing a tiny girl with a club or hammer or something.

"It's a new video game called 'Serial Killer. You've got to kill Bundy before he murders all the young girls."

"That is sick," Alicia said, turning her head away.

A boy from school named Bill Metcalf took a seat next to Boomer, spilling potato chips and beer on Tiffany's couch. "You can't kill him all at once, Boomer," Bill said. "You've got to do to him what he did to his victims — cut off a few parts at a time."

"How?" Boomer asked desperately. "Hurry up before he catches her!"

"You've got to find the butcher knife!" Bill said quickly. "It's hidden somewhere — look in the kitchen drawer! Try the cupboard! Maybe the sink."

Boomer fumbled rapidly with the joy stick button.

"Ooooh!" Boomer dropped the stick in disgust. "He got her," Boomer said.

Alicia was repulsed. "Is that what was so important?"

"Yeah. But it's too late now," Boomer said sadly. "He already got her. Okay, you can go…"

"Look out! Look out!" Bill was shouting, motioning to the screen. "Bundy's on the move again!" Boomer snatched up the joystick again and started clicking madly. Alicia made her way to the stairs. At the top of the stairs she headed down the hall to Tiffany's bedroom. As she passed Tiffany's parents' bedroom she paused.

The door was open a crack, and she saw Scott toweling his chest off. He must have used the Clarks' bathroom to shower. Alicia couldn't take her eyes off him. As always, she was struck by the way his muscles seemed to

ripple with a life of their own. And he had the most powerful set of abdominals she had ever seen.

And he was all *hers.*

A delicious thrill ran through Alicia.

All hers.

With a mischievous smile she pushed the bedroom door open.

And saw Ellen!

Chapter 16

Scott's sky-blue eyes shot over to her as the door creaked open. "Ali…" he said, a little nervously, dabbing the remaining moisture from his glistening, hairless chest.

"Hi, Alicia," Ellen said in a breezy manner. "I came in here to use the little girl's room — the boys are monopolizing the downstairs bathroom — and look who I found."

Alicia glanced at the open bathroom door. The light was still on, and there was steam coming out. She shouldn't be surprised, she told herself. She had seen it coming. But like a deer caught in the headlights, she just stood there, doing nothing. Nothing to save herself. Nothing to save her relationship with Scott.

"I had to shower to get all that gook off me," Scott said a little sheepishly. He slipped on a clean white T-shirt, probably one of Mr. Clark's. It was a little tight and Scott's muscles bulged beneath it.

"I think the bathroom's free now, Ellen," Alicia said. Her voice sounded catty to her. She hated playing the role of the jealous girlfriend. Ellen's eyes rolled lazily to the bathroom door, and she got up from the bed and entered the steamy bathroom.

The bathroom door clicked shut.

Scott smiled uneasily.

"I guess I'll see you downstairs," Alicia said angrily. "Unless you want to wait for Ellen!" She regretted saying anything. If Scott knew how upset she was, he'd just be defensive. He'd turn it around so she'd have to defend herself against being overly possessive. She spun around and left the room before Scott could reply. Inside Tiffany's bedroom, she pulled out a green-and-white Springwood High sweatshirt from the dresser and slipped it on. Then she made her way back down the hallway to the top of the stairs.

"Hey, Alicia, look who's here," Tiffany said from the foot of the stairs.

At the bottom of the staircase stood Evan.

He looked up at her with a hesitant smile. Alicia noticed that he was holding something behind his back.

Some of the noise quieted down. The crowd saw that Evan had arrived.

"You're a little late for a surprise birthday party, dude!" someone wisecracked. Some of the kids laughed.

Evan gave Tiffany a disappointed look. Tiffany just shrugged. "I guess Ellen gave you the wrong time."

"I guess," Evan said, unconvinced.

Pearl Jam's «Jeremy» blasted from the stereo speakers as Alicia hurried down the stairs. 'Thanks for coming, Evan," she said, glaring at Tiffany.

Evan smiled. "These are for you." From behind his back Evan brought out a bouquet of red roses.

Alicia's face puckered into a tight wrinkle, and then a sneeze exploded out of her.

"Whoa!" someone yelled. Others convulsed into laughter.

"Excuse me, Evan," Alicia said, digging into her jeans pocket for a handkerchief to wipe her runny nose. But she didn't have one. "I have a s-s-severe allergy t-to roses…"

Another sneeze exploded from her nostrils, partially blocked this time by the sleeve of Tiffany's sweatshirt, as the crowd roared again.

"Get Evan's present, Johnny," Ellen said from the stairs. She was standing next to Scott.

"Oh, no," Scott groaned.

Ellen laughed so hard she almost lost her balance on the narrow staircase. Scott slipped his hand around her narrow waist to keep her from falling.

Johnny reappeared from another room with Evan's clay girl. Except now it looked a lot different. Heavy makeup was smeared on what had once been its delicate face, and it had candles sticking out of its torso.

"Happy Birthday to you," the crowd started to sing.

Alicia felt sick to her stomach.

What had once been a work of art was now a ridiculous sideshow. But it was still unmistakably her. How could they? Alicia turned to Evan. His face was as pale as flour and his hands were trembling. He dropped the bouquet of roses, which scattered at his feet.

Then the crowd suddenly swooped Evan up and passed him over their heads in a long snake line that went out the kitchen door and to the pool.

Alicia stood stunned.

Things happened so quickly she had no time to react as Evan disappeared out the door. She heard a loud splash and a cheer went up from the backyard crowd. Evan had been dunked in the freezing cold water. Alicia pushed her way through the crowd, which was buzzing louder than ever now with excitement and laughter. People were exchanging high fives.

What a disaster, Alicia moaned to herself as she ran to the pool. The first few drops of rain had begun to fall. But before she could reach Evan, he had pulled himself out of the pool.

"Evan!" Alicia called, running to him.

But he was already hopping over the back fence.

He disappeared into the gloom of the night.

Chapter 17

The rain fell in heavy sheets, driven by a wind that seemed to have a mind of its own.

But for some reason Alicia couldn't guess at, Scott drove faster. The Chevy must now be doing at least fifty on the rain-soaked residential street.

Scott's varsity jacket was lying on the seat between them. She slipped it on. The sweatshirt she had borrowed from Tiffany was soaking wet, and she felt chilled.

Then Scott started fiddling with the car radio, the radio that hadn't worked in about ten years.

Alicia tried to stay calm. It wasn't the first time she'd been subjected to his erratic driving.

The car wipers were probably as old as the car itself, and worked about as well, making the world outside look like a big blur.

Alicia figured Scott was mad about having to leave the party, and driving crazy was his way of getting even. He was succeeding. She was scared.

"Slow down," Alicia said angrily for the third time. "I'd like to live to see my next birthday if you don't mind."

"We're not going to find him in this soup, you know," Scott said, slowing down slightly, then speeding up again. "He's probably back home by now. I'm running out of gas, by the way."

They had driven past Evan's house several times but saw no signs of life.

"Can we go back to the party now?" Scott asked in a grumpy voice. "I'm missing out on all the fun."

"You're lucky I'm even talking to you after what you and your friends did to Evan," Alicia countered. "At *my* party. So sorry you're missing out on *your* fun."

"That's right, Alicia. Your party. *Your* friends. *Your* friends did it to Evan."

They weren't her friends at all, Alicia realized. Tiffany was probably just using her birthday as an excuse to throw a big party. And Ellen certainly wasn't her friend — not the way she was making passes at Scott.

And Boomer and Johnny and Charlie were barely human. Alicia just had to find Evan. She'd never forgive herself if something terrible happened to him and it was her fault.

The sky was illuminated briefly by white lightning, then faded back to a gloomy charcoal color. The car lights barely cut through the murk. Thunder cracked all around them, and pounding rain continued to wash over the windshield, obscuring their view.

Scott drove faster. The car skidded against the curb as he lost control for a second.

"Stop the car and let me out," Alicia said flatly.

"Oh — don't have a cow," Scott said. The rain drummed noisily on the roof of the car.

"This is the last time I'm driving anywhere in this car with you," Alicia threatened.

"I don't know why you're mad at *me"* Scott said. "*I* didn't do anything to your nerdy friend."

"You knew about it."

"I did not."

"Don't lie to me, Scott. I heard you go 'oh no' up on the stairs." And I saw you put your arm around Ellen, she thought.

Scott was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I may have known about it, but I didn't help plan it. The truth is, I didn't actually think they'd go through with it…"

"Scott…" Alicia let out an exasperated air. "Do you think I'm blind? I saw it in your eyes. You probably masterminded the whole thing."

The worn-out wipers clacked rhythmically over the windshield, which was now covered in a veil of white steam. The defroster was useless.

They approached the intersection where Dr. Hawke had almost hit them yesterday morning. Scott wiped away some of the steam with the palm of his hand. He tried tuning the radio again before finally jamming in a cassette. The Grateful Dead blared through the speakers.

A flash of lightning outlined the large black blur hurtling toward them.

Scott never saw it.

A scream caught in Alicia's throat as the crunch of metal drove her into a world of darkness.

Chapter 18

The car filled with acrid, gray smoke. Choking her, blinding her. When she tried to move, every part of her body hurt. She heard footsteps, each click echoing and merging with the next. The vibrations made her head throb.

"Help us," she groaned through the smashed side window. She imagined the steps belonged to someone big and strong and brave. Someone who could rescue her. Pull her out of this nightmare.

The smoke got thicker. "We're trapped…"

A cackling laugh sent a bitter chill through her. In that moment she had an awful gut feeling — whoever belonged to that laugh wasn't there to help her. "No!" she screamed.

No! No! No! her mind cried out even as her voice gave up the battle.

That was the last thing she remembered.

That and the rain thundering off the car roof.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 19

The lights swirled relentlessly. Alicia felt the play of the light along her eyelids, as soft as the footsteps of mice. Around and around they went.

Where was she?

She tried to think, tried to remember.

A sickly, sweet-smelling smoke hung in the wet night air. She heard a bustle of activity nearby, the urgent shouts of men's voices.

Then she heard another voice.

A familiar voice.

Evan's voice.

Evan was talking excitedly to someone, explaining how the car had hit them and sped away. He had pulled her from the wreckage just before Scott's car had exploded into a fireball.

His voice cracked as he spoke.

Then she remembered.

Scott. Is Scott all right? Did Scott make it?

Why can't I see?

She tried to sit up. Everything hurt. She moaned in pain and lay back down. The rain was still coming down on her face.

She felt someone's arms wrap around her and felt comforted. "Alicia, lie still. You've been hurt," Evan said. "I'm here for you now."

The soothing tone of his voice was oddly hypnotic, like the swirling lights.

I'm here for you now… I'm here for you now… I'm here for you now…

The words kept spinning around in her head, like water going down a bathtub drain.

She felt Evan gently wipe the rain from her face.

There were footsteps and more voices, and she was placed on a gurney. She felt the gurney moving under her and heard doors close with a bang as the rain stopped hitting her face. Then the ambulance's engine roared to life as the vehicle lurched away —

— she heard the cackling laughter again —

She heard a piercing wail and realized it was coming from her own mouth.

She felt a sharp poke in her arm, as someone muttered something about going into shock.

And then she fell asleep. Mercifully asleep.

Until the nightmares came.

Chapter 20

Alicia opened her eyes.

She had drifted in and out of consciousness, like a drowning swimmer surfacing and gasping for air, before sinking down again into a sea of black dreams.

And each time she surfaced, she saw a hand reaching out to help her. Reaching, just inches away, but she couldn't grasp it.

And each time, the hand belonged to Evan.

Never Scott.

Always Evan.

She blinked several times, waiting for things to come into focus, but they didn't.

Oh, God, no, I'm blind!

How?

The accident, she remembered.

She tried to sit up, and everything that had hurt before hurt even more now. Her head felt stuffed with cotton, her throat was parched and dry, and there was a throbbing numbness from somewhere behind her eyes.

Where am I?

How long have I been here?

She heard soft whispers nearby.

Someone was whispering about her in the hushed tones usually reserved for the terminally ill.

Then she recognized her mother's voice, and another voice that sounded vaguely familiar — Dr. Harrison's voice, Boomer's dad.

They sounded somber, serious.

The smell of alcohol invaded her nostrils, mixed with the cheap perfume her mother wore on those rare occasions when she left the house. She heard some kind of faint beeping in the distance. Soon, she was noticing muted voices from all around her.

She was in a hospital room filled with a lot of people. Sickness was in the air.

A rustling sound next to her startled her.

She sat up — it hurt!

"She's awake, everyone!" Evan's voice boomed right next to her.

"Well, welcome back to the real world, Alicia!" Dr. Harrison said brightly.

Alicia sensed her mother hovering around her, fluffing pillows to help her sit up, running nervous fingers through her hair, pushing it out of her eyes, out of her sightless eyes. "You're going to be all right, sweetie," her mother said.

"How long have I…" been *dreaming?* "…been out?"

"For quite a while, but everything's going to be all right now," her mother prattled on.

"How long?" she insisted.

"Just a few days," Dr. Harrison said calmly.

A few *days*…

"You've had quite a shock," Dr. Harrison continued, his voice sounding professional. A doctor's voice.

The memory of the accident came back to her like an ice pick to the brain.

"Why can't I see?" Alicia asked, reaching her hands up to her eyes. Her eyes were still there, just sightless.

"Dr. Harrison says your eyes are fine, dear," came her mother's unsteady voice. "He's had specialists and all kinds of doctors in here while you were asleep. They took X rays and…"

"How can you tell me my eyes are fine?" Alicia howled loudly, painfully. "I'm blind!"

The room fell suddenly and absolutely silent. She guessed she was in a room with other patients. Other patients with other problems. She wondered for a moment if any of them were blind.

The voices slowly started up again. Softly at first, gradually less tentative.

Somewhere in the distance she heard a doctor being paged.

"How can you tell me my eyes are fine when I can't see?" Alicia asked again, this time in a softer voice.

"The force of the collision caused some damage to your retinas. But not enough to cause blindness," Dr. Harrison said uneasily. "So we think the cause may lie elsewhere — traumatic blindness is not so much a problem with your eyes as it is with your brain. Your eyes could see, but for some reason, your brain won't let them."

From somewhere in the room, Alicia heard soft sobbing.

"Will I be able to see again?" Alicia asked.

The sobbing grew louder.

"You've have quite a shock," was all Dr: Harrison would say.

"You talked quite a bit in your sleep," her mother said, her voice trembling.

"What did I say?" Alicia asked.

No one would answer her.

"Evan! Tell me what I said!"

"You mumbled something about Freddy Krueger," Evan told her.

So there it was. The man no one wanted to talk about. No one wanted to *think* about.

"S-so what you're saying is…" Alicia stopped, groping for words. "So what you're saying is that my blindness is all in my head and that I could see if I wanted to, but I don't want to because I'm afraid of what I might see and that the shock of… the shock of…" Alicia couldn't go on. She tried to picture Scott in her mind, but his face was obscured by a thick curtain of smoke.

The sobbing in the distance was louder than ever. A telephone rang, giving Alicia a start. Someone on the other side of the room picked it up and answered in a cheerful voice.

"As I said, we believe that your blindness is trauma induced," Dr. Harrison said.

"And what does that mean?" Alicia asked shrilly. "That I'm just *imagining* that I'm not seeing?"

"It means," Dr. Harrison said slowly, "that there may be some… some… *psychological* force at work that is causing your blindness."

Dr. Harrison's voice droned on like a warped audio tape playing inside Alicia's head. Maybe because she didn't believe a word he was saying. She couldn't be blind. Not for real. She was going to art school next fall — she was going to be a painter. This had to be a bad dream.

"You're going to see again," came Evan's voice out of the blue, blotting out the doctor's voice. "Trust me, Alicia. You *will* see again. These doctors are full of…"

"Young man, perhaps you should wait outside…" Dr. Harrison began.

"No, I want him here," Alicia said firmly. Evan was the only one being honest with her. She needed him there.

She could hear Dr. Harrison exhale noisily.

"Dr. Harrison just doesn't want your friend giving you any false hope," Mrs. Norris said.

Of course not, Alicia thought bitterly. They want me to reconcile myself to being blind.

"My uncle can help you," Evan said confidently. "So don't believe them when…"

"Your uncle was once a very respected doctor, young man, but he has long since retired, and he's totally out of touch with the advances modern science has made in eye care. In fact, he should consider himself lucky to even be alive after the way his heart stopped…"

"My uncle's fine now that he's out of this hospital," Evan said in a nasty tone of voice.

Dr. Harrison exhaled heavily again. "Perhaps what you need right now is some rest," he said to Alicia. "I'm going to prescribe a mild sedative to help you sleep…"

"That's all right," Alicia said curtly. "I would prefer to stay awake." The last thing she wanted to do was sleep. As bad as things seemed to her now, she knew her nightmares would be even worse.

"I know my uncle can help you," Evan said again.

"Perhaps you should do as the doctor says," Mrs. Norris patted her daughter's shoulder with a trembling hand. "Get some rest, dear."

"I want to get out of here — now," Alicia said sharply. "And I want to take my X rays with me."

"There's really no need for that…" Dr. Harrison began.

"Now!" Alicia said emphatically.

"Dear…" her mother began to say.

"Now!"

After a pause, Dr. Harrison said to Mrs. Norris, "If she would feel more comfortable at home we can check her out this afternoon. There's really nothing more we can do for her at the moment. She can come back for a follow-up exam when she's calmed down."

"The sooner I'm out of here, the better," Alicia said. "I have things to do."

She felt Evan's hand squeeze her shoulder. The fingers were long and slender and soft, so soft for a boy's hand, soft and warm like her mother's hand. But without the trembling.

"*We* have things to do," Alicia said, placing her hand over Evan's.

Chapter 21

Alicia tried everything she could think of to help herself. She tried crying, hoping that the tears would soothe her eyes and wash away the blindness. She tried smiling and laughing, hoping that her good humor would force down the psychological barrier that stood between her eyes and her brain. She asked her mother to get articles about her condition and read them to her. But her mother was in worse shape now than she had been before the accident.

The nightmares followed her home from the hospital. Every night she struggled with demons that grabbed her, shook her, poked at her eyes, and swore to never give her any rest.

Without her sleep, she began to feel increasingly paranoid. She went back for an office visit with Dr. Harrison, who offered her no hope. "Tincture of time," he told her. "Just wait and see."

Alicia resented his choice of words. She resented him, and her blindness, and a lot of other things, including her mother's depression, her father's death, her stupid friends, everything. She let out a good long scream in Dr. Harrison's office, and was sent home with a prescription for sleeping pills.

She wished she had someone else's opinion. Someone she trusted. Someone she still loved… Scott.

Where was Scott? Where was her boyfriend? Where was the guy who was supposed to love her? All of her questions about Scott were met with vague responses. He was okay but he was still recovering; he was in a different wing of the hospital; he was home recuperating and he'll see you when he can.

See me when he can? At first, Alicia couldn't believe he would abandon her. She wondered if he was dead. Maybe everybody thought she wouldn't be able to handle such a shock, though she couldn't get much more blind than she already was. She made her mother swear to her that Scott was still alive.

She remembered their last night together — Tiffany's party. She had yelled at him and dragged him away on a wild goose chase. He was

probably relieved to be rid of her. But then it dawned on Alicia that Tiffany wasn't coming to visit her either.

It was Evan who finally confirmed her fears and told her the truth: Scott had dumped her for Ellen. Alicia was wild with anger. Well — ha ha — she had *seen* it coming. She started to think of ways to punish him. She had terrible visions — ideas more clear than real sight. But they were nightmares by day, added to nightmares by night, and now there was no escape to be had at all! She thought she would lose her mind.

If only she could see! Then she could do something about her pathetic life. She begged her brain to let her eyes do their job. But the harder she tried, the more frustrated and depressed she became. Alicia suspected that the doctors and her mother and everyone else were all hiding something from her. They all were lying to her — about Scott, about her eyes, about God knew what else.

Only Evan would tell her the truth.

Loyal Evan, faithful Evan. She clutched his arms at last and begged him to take her to his uncle. And the next day, they went.

It was a cool, breezy autumn morning, and Alicia thought of other autumn days when she had taken her paints out to capture the colors of the leaves. That was before.

She held Evan's arm now as he led her up the flagstone walk to his house — the *broken* flagstone walk, she realized as she stubbed her toe — where his uncle still kept his office even though he was retired.

Evan's faith in his uncle bordered on reverence. Alicia decided that Dr. Hawke was probably a victim of quacks like Dr. Harrison. Dr. Hawke would be able to offer her more than sleeping pills, she was certain. Evan had already given his uncle Alicia's X rays, so he would be familiar with her case before he even began the examination.

Evan swung open the door to the ramshackle house he called home. For a moment Alicia felt as if she were stepping into the gaping mouth of a primeval beast. It was probably just a fear of the unknown, of things she could not see.

The floorboards creaked wherever they stepped. The carpet felt threadbare beneath her feet, and Alicia detected a funny smell to the house. A stuffy, moldy smell, like something or someone had died but the odor still lingered. And then they went down the stairs to where Dr. Hawke kept his office — in the basement.

It was hot in the basement.

The doctor must have the furnace going full blast, Alicia guessed. Well, old people don't like the cold, she figured. But for some reason she couldn't quite pinpoint, the intense heat gave her a creepy feeling. Like many things did, now that she was blind. Sound, smell, touch, taste, and fear — everything was magnified now.

Especially fear.

"Uncle Manfred, this is the girl I was telling you about," Evan said.

What sounded like a swivel chair squeaked and Alicia felt long, bony fingers encompass her tiny, slender hand. She felt a tiny scratch against the back of her hand. The doctor's fingernails needed clipping.

"I am very pleased to meet you, my poor, unfortunate girl."

Alicia smiled. What could she say?

Dr. Hawke led her to what felt like a dentist's chair and sat her down. "You may leave now, Evan," Dr. Hawke said. "I wish to examine the young lady in private."

"But Uncle…" Evan protested.

"Now, young man!" Dr. Hawke commanded in a forceful tone.

"Yes, sir," Evan said, dejected. "I'll wait for you upstairs, Alicia," he added. Alicia heard a door close.

"Dr. Hawke, I have to warn you I have no money to pay you…" Alicia blurted out.

But the doctor shushed her. "Money is not an issue here. If money were an issue do you think that I would live in a house like this? Now be quiet and let me examine you."

There was a click, and Alicia felt a bright light shining on her face. Then she heard the doctor pull on a pair of squeaky, surgical gloves. "Evan obtained copies of your X rays for me," he said as he gently probed her eyes.

"I will do anything to get my vision back, Dr. Hawke." Alicia said.

"Hmmm," the doctor grumbled.

Alicia felt a lump form in her throat. She didn't like the sound of that "hmmm." Then the light clicked off and the doctor was quiet. The only sound in the office was the ticking of his pocket watch. Finally Alicia broke the silence. "W-will I see again, Dr. Hawke? Is there anything you can do to help me?"

"Yes. There is some retina damage, but that can be repaired fairly easily," Dr. Hawke said. "However, I believe the blindness is caused by another factor."

Alicia's heart pounded. Another factor? Something incurable? Permanent? "What?" she blurted out.

"I believe your blindness is caused by damage to the optic nerve," Dr. Hawke concluded.

Alicia felt a wave of relief sweep over her. She told him the opinions of the specialists, that the blindness was trauma induced, that she was blocking out the memory of the accident, and if she could get over her fear, her sight would return.

"No, no, that's not the problem," Dr. Hawke said reassuringly. "Anyone who believes that prognosis is simply deluding themselves — and you."

"Then I'll be able to see again?" Alicia asked, allowing herself a glimmer of hope.

"Perhaps," Dr. Hawke said.

Alicia felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Let me explain how the eye works. It is very much like a camera. Light rays enter the eye in much the same way light rays enter the lens of a camera, except with the eye the rays pass through a transparent layer of skin called the conjunctiva. Then the rays pass through a second layer called the cornea which bends them, and then the lens brings them into focus on the retina at the back of the eye, which in turn sends the brain a message along the optic nerve to create a picture of what you are seeing. Do you follow me so far?"

"To tell you the truth," Alicia said, "I'm so tired and so depressed and frightened and confused, it's hard for me to follow along very well. I just can't concentrate like normal."

"To put it simply then," Dr. Hawke said more slowly, "I believe your optic nerves are receiving a scrambled message, though I'm not sure why. This is a very strange case."

Alicia realized she was sweating profusely, either from the heat in the basement or just plain nervousness. Or maybe both. A drop of perspiration fell into her eye and she wiped it away.

"The eye is a very complex piece of machinery," Dr. Hawke continued. "I believe if we could replace the optic nerve, your sight would return. I'm not sure. It is a very delicate operation. And even then the chances of

success are roughly one in three. The new optic nerve must fit in smoothly with the rest of the machinery. Like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle."

"When can you perform the operation?" Alicia asked flatly.

"You will need an eye donor," Dr. Hawke explained. "Two eye donors, at least. Perhaps more."

Alicia nodded weakly.

"Do you have medical insurance?" Dr. Hawke asked her.

Alicia felt the familiar despair. "No."

"Then I guess you will have to break into an eye bank," Dr. Hawke said with a raspy laugh.

Alicia frowned. She felt the desperation grip her like a vise. "I'll do whatever you tell me I need to do," she said.

Chapter 22

Evan squirmed in the tiny utility closet. He had crept inside the cramped space next to the basement stairs so he could listen to what was going on. He had been angry that his uncle wouldn't let him stay. After all, he had brought Alicia to him. Evan felt responsible for the blind girl now. She depended on him almost exclusively.

Just as he had planned.

Evan placed his eye back to the peephole that allowed him a view of the examining room. He looked at Alicia again. She was the prettiest cheerleader of them all, he thought, even if she was blind.

Such a shame.

A horrible shame.

If only he could so something to help.

He'd do anything to help the blind girl see again.

To make the blind girl his.

Anything.

Chapter 23

As Evan escorted Alicia home after the examination, Alicia's thoughts swirled. An eye donor — two at least. Dead people's eyes, stuck in her head. The idea repulsed her. But if that was the only way to see, to paint, again…

"Alicia, may I take you to the homecoming dance?" Evan asked.

Alicia was speechless. "You want to take a *blind* girl to the homecoming dance?" she finally said.

"I want to take *you*," Evan said.

She tightened her grip on Evan's lead arm. "That's really very sweet," was all she could think to say.

"Then you'll go?" Evan asked excitedly.

Alicia felt dizzy. She had to find eye donors. How could she possibly think about going to a dance? "I don't feel very stable, to tell you the truth. I don't feel capable of having a good time at this point."

"No problem," Evan said.

Alicia could tell she had disappointed him.

"Ali!" she heard a voice call to her. Tiffany's voice. "Can you come over for a minute? I have to talk to you."

Tiffany met them halfway down the sidewalk, holding her arm out for Alicia to take. "Thank you, Evan," Tiffany said brusquely, whisking her friend away.

"Bye, Evan," Alicia said over her shoulder, a little put off by Tiffany's rudeness. "I'll call you later."

Inside Tiffany's house, Alicia said, "Do you have to talk to him that way? Evan's been helping me more than…"

Barbed laughter cut her off. Ellen's laughter. "Evan's no great help to you, Alicia," Ellen said. Ellen Sawyer, who had stolen her boyfriend. Ellen Sawyer, whose eyes she would love to scratch out.

"You wouldn't be hanging out with him if you knew what he did to Scott," Tiffany said gravely.

Alicia suddenly felt cold all over. "What did he do? What are you talking about?" she asked, not sure she was ready to hear the answer.

"Well…" Tiffany began.

Chapter 24

Evan saw them coming just a little too late.

Johnny Murphy's Jeep Cherokee screeched to a halt in front of Evan's house just as he was walking up the driveway. Boomer burst out of the Jeep and knocked Evan to the ground.

Evan instinctively rolled into a tight ball as Boomer started kicking him. "This is for Scott," Boomer said through clenched teeth as he rammed his heavy boots into Evan's ribs.

Johnny jumped out of the Jeep. "And this is for Alicia!" Johnny sucker punched Evan in the mouth. Evan staggered backward and fell down. "Stay away from both of them!"

Evan wiped blood from his lip. He looked up at Johnny with hate-filled eyes. "You should be thankful, Murphy," Evan said. "That girlfriend of yours was hitting on Scott Martin since day one — you were just too stupid to see it."

Johnny grew red in the face.

"She even made a move on me last week when you were at football practice." Evan climbed to his feet, wincing in pain. "Sat right in my lap in that little MG of hers. Ask anyone. Plenty of people saw us."

Johnny exploded and threw a right hook into Evan's face, knocking him to the ground again. Then he whipped out his switchblade knife and stuck it in front of Evan's face. "You shut up about my girlfriend, you little creep!" Johnny screamed, his features contorted in rage. "Or I'll slash your face. I oughta do it anyway for what you did to Scott — an eye for an eye."

Boomer pulled Johnny away from Evan. "Not the knife, Johnny. He's not worth going to jail over."

"Ask your so-called girlfriend if you don't believe me," Evan said defiantly.

Livid, Johnny stormed back to the Jeep and pulled Evan's clay doll from the front seat. "By the way, geek, you left this at Tiffany's house." With a quick thrust Johnny jammed the knife blade into the clay girl's head.

Evan groaned in pain as if he himself had been stabbed.

"That's what's going to happen to you next!" Boomer said with a malicious smile. "If you ever go near Scott or Alicia again."

Johnny took the clay girl, the knife still in its head, and threw it beneath the wheels of his Jeep. Then he jumped in the Jeep and backed it over the figure.

Evan gasped in honor.

Boomer laughed. "Good one, Johnny."

Johnny and Boomer exchanged high fives. Their arms were still waving in the air when a gunshot exploded.

Chapter 25

A covey of birds was flushed from a nearby elm tree.

Evan didn't move. Had he been shot? He gently flexed his arms and legs, testing his body for injury.

"Leave that boy alone and get on out of here."

Evan recognized the gruff voice even before Johnny's grandfather came into sight. Old Man Murphy had a Winchester pump shotgun resting in the crook of his muscular forearm; the barrel was still smoking. His leathery, wrinkled face was covered with white stubble, and he was wearing an old, crushed hat with fish hooks sticking out of it.

He smiled and revealed a set of crooked teeth. "Fun's over, Johnny." Then the smile quickly vanished. "Take your friend and get the hell of out of here. Now!"

Johnny glared at his grandfather. "Someday I'll make you eat that gun, old man."

Boomer hopped into the Jeep and Johnny roared away.

"Are you all right, son?" Old Man Murphy asked Evan, lowering the barrel of the gun.

"Yeah. Thanks."

For a moment the old man said nothing. Evan wondered if the old man was going senile. Then he muttered, "I never did like that punk. Hard to believe he's my kin." He turned and walked away without saying another word.

Evan looked around to make sure the boys weren't coming back for him. Then he tenderly lifted the clay girl from the gutter. His work of art, his labor of love, had been mutilated. Johnny's knife was still jammed in its head, and the body had been crushed by the Jeep tires.

Evan removed a handkerchief from his pocket — Alicia's handkerchief — and gingerly pulled the knife out of the clay girl's head. He noticed the red dragon design on the handle of the knife and decided he liked it. The knife was his now, as far as he was concerned.

He carried the clay girl into his backyard and dug a hole next to where he had buried the cats.

Yes, he would give the girl a proper burial.

He would give them all proper burials.

Chapter 26

"I don't believe you!" screamed Alicia as Tiffany finished telling her what had happened to Scott. "Evan wouldn't… he couldn't…" She burst into tears. The thought of her boyfriend hurt like that, his face reduced to a bloody pulp, now a mass of scar tissue, was impossible for Alicia to imagine. When she saw Scott in her mind's eye, he was the most handsome boy she had ever seen in her life. His friendly smile quickly breaking into a goofy grin. That was her boyfriend. Not some sideshow freak.

"Believe it, Alicia," added Ellen. "His face looks like it was raked over by a sharpened fork. The gashes are just awful. I visited him in the hospital right after the accident. He was barely conscious. He was bundled up like a mummy. But ever since they took the bandages off, he doesn't want to see anyone."

Alicia fell back in the easy chair. She wasn't sure what to believe. Could she trust Ellen and Tiffany to tell her the truth? They weren't exactly the most devoted, trustworthy friends a girl could ask for.

Besides, even if what they said about Scott was true — that his face was totally messed up — how did they know it was Evan who had done the damage, and not the accident itself?

A gunshot derailed Alicia's train of thought. She sat bolt upright. "What was that?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Tiffany said uneasily, moving toward the window.

At any moment, Alicia expected a bullet to crash through the window. A part of her hoped it would go right through Ellen's head.

"I think it's just Old Man Murphy shooting off his gun again!" came Tiffany's voice.

"Down by Evan's house?" Alicia asked, worried. "They're doing something to Evan, aren't they?"

"Ali, have you heard a word we said the last ten minutes?" Tiffany asked.

"She heard us — she just doesn't want to believe it," Ellen said.

"It's all true, Ali," Tiffany said adamantly. "He's a nut. It's not just the guys joking around. Sure, they make up a lot of outrageous stuff about Evan

that's not true. But some of it's not made up. And we're getting nervous about it."

"We've all done a lot of talking since the accident," Ellen said. "All the guys decided to talk straight about Evan, about what's made up and what's real. They're scared, Alicia. They don't want to admit it, but they're scared."

"So what do they say that's real that's so awful," Alicia challenged. "That he's smarter than they are? That he's kinder than they are?"

"Dead cats," Tiffany said, as if that said it all.

"Dead cats? What about dead cats?" Alicia asked.

"He's associated with dead cats. Charlie's seen him carrying one late at night, and I've seen him bury one in his backyard."

"Charlie's one to talk about dead cats," Alicia said. "Not exactly something you could take to court."

"He talks to himself," Ellen said. "A lot. It's spooky. Whole conversations."

"Says who?"

"Boomer and his brother. They heard him once while following him after school. They were up to their usual antics. It gave them such creeps, they decided to just go home. They told their father about it. Then that night when Evan's uncle went to the hospital, Boomer's dad said the same thing happened. Boomer's dad said it gave him the creeps too."

"Evan's uncle almost died that night," Alicia said. "Most people would cut him a little slack under the circumstances."

"Evan's uncle didn't almost die," Ellen corrected her. "He died. Flatline. He was dead for a good long while, then suddenly he wasn't dead anymore."

Alicia shrugged.

"I think Evan's a schizophrenic," Tiffany said.

"You don't even know what that means," Alicia replied with a sigh. She felt her head begin to swim. She shrank back and let herself be swallowed up in the easy chair. She simply refused to believe what they said about Evan.

"It's just a lot of lies and exaggeration," Alicia said, knowing that if she didn't have Evan to hang onto, she could easily whirl out of control.

"Alicia, we came here because we care about you," Ellen said. "We're scared for ourselves. What happened to Scott and you is a nightmare. We're

scared we might be next. We're scared that something worse might happen to you."

"Lies and exaggeration," Alicia repeated out loud. And to herself again and again. Lies and exaggeration.

It had to be.

Chapter 27

When Evan entered the house, Dr. Hawke was there to greet him.

Evan went to the kitchen sink and washed the blood and the dirt from his hands.

"Have they been beating up on you again, boy?" Dr. Hawke asked.

"Yes, sir," Evan said acidly.

Just like me when I was a kid, Dr. Hawke thought.

"You love that blind girl, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Evan said, wiping his hands on a dirty dishrag. His eyes drifted down to the kitchen floor as if studying a piece of chipped linoleum. "But she doesn't love me."

"Not yet," Dr. Hawke said.

Evan didn't reply.

"You know what you have to do, don't you?" Dr. Hawke asked.

Evan shook his head no.

"No gain without pain," Dr. Hawke said.

No gain without pain echoed an evil voice in Evan's mind.

Chapter 28

Evan's hand was shaking as he took another sip of his uncle's cold, German lager beer, one he had snuck out of the fridge. Not that his uncle would mind. His uncle was pretty cool. His uncle and Alicia Norris and maybe Old Man Murphy next door were all pretty cool.

The rest could all die.

He grinned. He had a few wild ideas he'd have to give a little thought to. He'd knew that all he really had to do was wait for the voices to give him a little help. The voices were very creative. Evan had come to enjoy their company.

He ran the cool beer bottle over his swollen lip where Johnny had punched him.

They had beat him up because of what had happened to Scott. Not that they needed a reason. But now Alicia would know. Or suspect. He took a deep breath, snatched the phone from its cradle with a trembling hand, and dialed Alicia's number.

Alicia picked up right away. "Hello?"

Some mucus caught in Evan's throat. He took another drink of beer.

"Hello?" Alicia asked anxiously.

"Hello, Alicia," Evan said breathlessly. He had never called a girl before. He hadn't realized how difficult it would be.

"Evan…?"

"Hi," he said, picturing her standing with the phone pressed against her face. She was so great looking with her wild hair and dark brown eyes. Her eyes could still blaze right into him even though they were sightless.

"Hello, Evan," Alicia said.

She sounded okay about hearing from him, he thought. He hoped.

A cool breeze blew through Evan's house and tickled the back of his neck, raising goosebumps. He turned around, expecting to see his uncle, but there was no one there.

"What's up, Evan?"

"Um… you said you'd call me and when you didn't I thought I'd call you instead. You know, in case you needed something."

'Thanks Evan. But I'm okay."

An awkward silence followed.

"Um… Alicia… I know what they've been saying about me."

"What do you mean, Evan?"

"I've heard some talk about me and Scott and I want you to know it's all a bunch of lies," Evan continued hurriedly. "All lies. You know how they're always making up stories about me. The only thing is this time I actually saved a guy's life, and they still hate me. Still tell lies about me."

Alicia was breathing heavily into the phone. "Don't worry about it Evan, okay?"

"Okay." Evan struggled to make his brain work, struggled to remember what to say next. "Um… did you think about what I asked you before?"

"About what?"

"About, you know, the homecoming dance?"

"Oh," Alicia said, and her mood suddenly changed. Evan thought maybe he shouldn't have brought the subject up so soon. "I guess I'm still thinking about it. Can I let you know later?"

"That's cool," Evan blurted out. "No problem. I really just wanted to let you know that if you needed anything, I'm available."

"Thank you, Evan."

She sounded grateful. Like his uncle had said she would be.

"I'm here for you if you need me."

"I know, Evan."

He loved it when she said his name. "And don't worry, because you're going to get your eyesight back." His heart was heaving inside his chest. "One way or the other."

Alicia mumbled something. Was she crying? He couldn't tell.

They said good-bye.

When Evan hung the phone up he had a big smile on his face.

This was the start of something great, he knew.

The start of a whole new life.

And the end of a few others.

Chapter 29

The next afternoon Alicia called Evan.

She had to go to the hospital for another follow-up exam with Dr. Harrison. Something about a CAT scan. Then she was supposed to have her first meeting with a psychiatrist.

Her mother had offered to take her, but Alicia wasn't in the mood to cheer up her depressed mother yet again. She couldn't go alone, though. Evan said he would be more than happy to drive her.

On the ride over, Alicia became increasingly nervous. The idea of more tests unnerved her. She tried to joke about it with Evan — about it being a «cat» scan, like for his strays. But her joke was weak, and Evan didn't get it anyway.

Alicia fidgeted in her seat. Then she ran her hands over the dashboard. Then she started drumming her fingertips against the side of the door.

Evan's attempts to put her at ease didn't help. She knew he meant well, but she couldn't shake the dread. The hospital was where Alicia felt most helpless… most hopeless.

In contrast, Dr. Hawke's little office in the basement of Evan's house had felt like a safe haven. Maybe it was because he kept it so nice and toasty-warm down there.

Alicia recalled her nightmare of the night before. In it, she was leaving the hospital and passed by two bodies being wheeled in on gurneys. The bodies were covered with sheets; but as the gurneys passed her, the sheets billowed up and she could see who was underneath. It was Boomer and Tiffany. Boomer's legs were gone. Bloody stumps protruded from beneath his practice jersey. And Tiffany's eyes were missing. Alicia woke up screaming — the way she usually woke up these days.

Now, as a nurse led her into the examination room she found herself unable to shake the images from her nightmare. She felt gripped with panic, and insisted that Evan remain by her side. The doctor in charge grumbled his disapproval, but in the end Evan was allowed to stay.

They made Alicia lie down on a padded table. A huge machine was rotated over her.

The doctor ordered Evan to step to one side.

"Evan?" Alicia called out. She hardly recognized her own voice. It sounded like the voice of a frightened little girl. She felt Evan's long delicate fingers encircle her outstretched hand, the same fingers that had created the beautiful clay doll. He squeezed her hand reassuringly, unclasped her hand, and stepped aside again.

"I'm here, Ali," came his voice from somewhere behind her.

Alicia heard the machine buzz. She had forgotten to ask what they were doing first. The CAT scan? It was some kind of X ray, she knew. X rays didn't hurt, she reminded herself.

This is a big mistake, a voice inside her head said.

But another voice told her she was just being chicken.

The machine whirred loudly. Over the noise she heard the doctor say something to Evan. Evan said something in response. The doctor told Evan not to mess with something. Evan said something about the wires being frayed —

— The shock hit her brain like a fistful of exploding dynamite —

She shook on the table.

She would have screamed if she could have.

— Another shock shot up the length of her body sending a jolt up her spine. Her eye-teeth chattered as a red wave of agony swept over her —

"Do something!" she heard Evan yelling frantically. "Before you kill her!"

— Another shock hit her and something that smelled like rotten eggs filled the air. She felt tiny sizzling-crackling sparks raining down on her face and into her hair —

Alicia gagged back the bitter taste of bile that filled her mouth.

And then her head floated away into an ominous dark cloud.

Chapter 30

Alicia was still shaking as Evan walked her to the medical office building that stood next to the hospital. He had already called the psychiatrist's office to say that Alicia would be a half hour late. Considering the circumstances, the psychiatrist had done the unheard of. He allowed her to come in anyway, apparently sacrificing part of his own lunch time to help his new and desperate patient.

"I'm really sorry," Evan said again as they rode the elevator up to the fifth floor.

"It wasn't your fault," Alicia assured him. Her temples were still throbbing.

"I may have overreacted by yanking the plug out — but that idiot doctor was killing you. I don't know for sure what happened, but the wires in back of the machine looked loose or something."

"I think you just saved my life," Alicia said gratefully.

Evan smiled.

"I'm not too eager to turn myself over to a psychiatrist," Alicia confided. "My mind is so messed up at this point that I don't think there's anyone in the world who could straighten it out."

"I don't think you have much choice about it, Alicia," Evan said calmly. "You're not getting good sleep. You're exhausted. It's unhealthy."

He guided her through the doorway and into the psychiatrist's waiting room.

"Alicia," Evan said softly, as she sat down to wait. The receptionist turned back to her magazine. "I'll be back for you in an hour. You can tell me all about it if you want to, or you don't have to tell me anything."

"You're very understanding, Evan," Alicia said softly. "I guess I can handle this alone."

Evan gave her hand a squeeze, then he was gone.

* * *

An hour later, Alicia felt like she had been through yet another nightmare. She had not expected that she would have to relive all the awful experiences of the last few weeks. The doctor seemed to want to understand her, and apparently thought it would be good for her to spill it all out, clear her mind. But what it really did was make her suffer through it yet again. When she emerged from his office, she hardly felt cured.

"We'll see you a week from today at eleven, then," he chirped as he guided her back to the reception room where Evan was waiting for her. The doctor acknowledged Evan with a nod, then turned to reenter his inner sanctum.

Evan said a quick hello to Alicia, then escorted her down and out of the building. The hearse was parked in the lot close by.

They drove home in silence until they reached Elm Street.

"I don't suppose you've thought about the homecoming dance at all? It's just that it's coming up pretty soon and I… I don't know… I guess I just wanted to be the first in line to ask you."

"Yeah, well," Alicia said, "as you can see that line isn't very long." Scott isn't even on it, Alicia thought sadly. "So if I do go, it'll be with you."

"I hear you're still in the running for homecoming queen," Evan announced.

"Well, I'm sure to get the sympathy vote," Alicia said with a warped smile.

"You've got my vote."

Alicia didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Evan pulled up in front of Alicia's house. He walked around to the passenger side to open her door and escort her up the front walk. Alicia heard the front door open as they approached.

Then she heard her mother's voice, with more energy behind it than had been there for a long, long time.

"Thank goodness you're home safely! There's terrible news! Terrible! Boomer and Tiffany!"

"What?" Alicia said, terrified, a stream of horrible possibilities racing through her mind. She walked toward her mother's voice and reached out to find her hands.

"A hit-and-run accident! About an hour ago. The ambulances were here. The police. They're all gone now. It was chaos."

"What about Boomer and Tiffany?"

Then her mother told her. "The car ran over the Harrison boy's legs."

Alicia felt her head spin. "Tiffany? What about Tiffany?" The images from her nightmare filled her mind. Boomer and Tiffany…

"They can't find her body!" her mother said.

Alicia felt dizzy as the ground began to heave and tilt at odd angles. She felt herself floating down in slow motion — this was what it felt like to faint, she realized.

Evan caught her as she fell, and carried her up the stairs to her bedroom.

Chapter 31

Alicia was already blind. Now she felt paralyzed too. She needed to do something. She needed to help. Somehow. She wanted to fix things up. Undo what had been done. Boomer without legs, she thought, was worse than Scott without a face.

And Tiffany was still missing. She needed people out searching for her. There was still hope that she was alive.

But Alicia was trapped inside her body, unable to do little more than twiddle her thumbs. She could search nowhere, arrange nothing.

She had second thoughts now about asking Evan to take her anywhere. Second and third and fourth thoughts. Tiffany had been afraid of Evan. Maybe Tiffany had been right.

The nightmare about Boomer and Tiffany had come true. If only Alicia could have done something to prevent all this. But how could she possibly have known that that particular nightmare would come true? She suffered through horrible, violent dreams every night. If all of them came true, most of Elm Street, and all of Springwood High would be dead or destroyed by now.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Alicia called.

The door opened. "Alicia, don't you even keep your door locked?" It was Ellen.

"I'd just have to get up and fumble my way over to open it. Why bother?"

There was a long pause. "There's still no word on Tiffany. They say Boomer will live."

"Have you seen him yet?" asked Alicia.

"I must have some kind of flaw I'm not aware of. Nobody will let me visit them in the hospital. First Scott, now Boomer. Charlie saw them both."

"Charlie's a guy. Don't take it personally," Alicia responded. Why was she trying to make Ellen feel better? she wondered. She didn't even like her.

"That's nice of you to say, after what we've both been through."

Alicia didn't say.

"Do you want to visit them?" Ellen asked quietly.

"I'd take you."

Suddenly it dawned on Alicia that nobody had even offered to do that for her before, and she hadn't even thought of asking.

"That's nice of you to offer, considering what *you've* been through."

"So, you want to go see them?"

Alicia shook her head. "I think I'd better wait. I know I'm in bad shape." Another blanket of depression seemed to layer itself over her. "I'd better wait." She shook her head, incredulous that her life was in this condition.

"Okay," Ellen said. "Let me know if you change your mind."

Alicia heard Ellen get up and go to the door to leave. "Hey, Ellen," Alicia said evenly. "Will you come again tomorrow?"

"Sure," Ellen said. Then she left.

Alicia got up, shuffled her way over to the front door, and locked it.

*** * ***

Ellen wished she hadn't gone to see Alicia. She felt worse now than before. Anxious. Not sure of where to go or why.

She had meant to go to Alicia's to be kind to her. But now she felt like all she had done was make things worse.

Alicia seemed incredibly depressed, Ellen thought. Well, it was understandable. But she must be getting a lot of sympathy from people. That was probably a comfort to her. Alicia's problem was obvious. She must feel practically smothered by all the attention she was getting.

While Ellen got none.

Because Ellen's problem was invisible.

Nobody could possibly understand. The rise and fall of Ellen. One day nothing. Then suddenly a curling iron, some lipstick and a bra, and she was captain of the cheerleading squad with a good chance of dating the best-looking football player in the school.

Now it was gone. All of it. The football player was a mess. Football games were being canceled. Ellen was living in such a state of constant fear that she could barely remember to put her lipstick on in the morning.

Tears came to her eyes and began to roll down her cheeks as she walked toward home. Nobody even knew that she was terrified for her own

safety. Nobody knew that she was starting to have nightmares of her own. Probably no one would even care.

Ellen allowed the tears to keep falling. Captain of the varsity cheerleaders, she thought to herself. Some thrill. Some honor. She hadn't even gone to practice all week.

* * *

Old Man Murphy leaned on a cane as he smoked his cigar, his fish-hook hat perched on his head. He always had his nightly smoke beneath the branches of the elm tree in his front yard. Mrs. Murphy wouldn't allow him to smoke in the house. And although she had been dead a long time, he still respected her wishes.

The skeletal branches of the old elm tree glistened in the pale streetlights.

He had learned to respect the dead.

The crunch of dry leaves caught his attention. An attractive blonde girl briskly strode down the sidewalk toward him. He recognized her as his grandson's girlfriend. What was her name? Helen or Elise or something like that. Ellen. That was it. He had met her once but couldn't remember where.

He couldn't remember a lot of things nowadays.

And some things he would rather just forget.

"Hello, Ellen!" he barked as she passed.

The girl gasped, startled by the voice in the darkness.

She didn't answer. Just picked up her pace.

The nervous type, Old Man Murphy thought, watching her hurry away.

Of course there were good reasons to be nervous on this street.

He took a last puff of the cigar, and sent a plume of bluish smoke into the cool night air. He was just turning to go back to the house when he heard the scream.

Or was it a scream?

It had been small. It had come from the direction Ellen had been walking in. It could have been a muffled scream. Like a scream with a big hand over the mouth, to mute it. Or it might have been an animal making some sort of noise — a celebratory noise of victory over some little

captured prey item. Maybe it had been a cat. The street sure was crawling with them these days.

His ears were going as bad as the rest of him, he thought. He already suffered from the ringing in them. Drove him crazy, that ringing. Now he couldn't even tell if something was a human scream, or a cat screech.

Maybe he should take a closer look, he thought. Make sure the girl was okay. Old Man Murphy started to walk in that direction. Maybe she slipped and fell, he thought as he scanned the area as best he could. It was a dark, moonless night. Not all the streetlights were working, and it was almost impossible to see farther than a few feet.

He heard another sound — a shuffling of feet maybe. Or someone dragging something…

He wished he were leaning on his rifle now, instead of his cane. He walked quickly back toward his own house.

At the edge of the white picket fence that surrounded his yard, Murphy peered into the darkness. He saw someone run away.

Was it his grandson? He couldn't be sure.

It could have been anyone.

Anyone at all.

He threw down the stub of his cigar and went into his house to get the shotgun.

Chapter 32

Where was Ellen? Alicia wondered. Maybe she had forgotten.

Alicia sat on the seat of the rusty old swing set in her backyard. She couldn't believe how disappointed she was. She had actually been looking forward to a visit from Ellen. A girl she didn't even like! Her life had become too pathetic for words.

The noise of chirping crickets seemed magnified a thousand times. And they were all screaming at her. She rocked back and forth, back and forth, the swing making a creaky, grating sound. Anything to shut out the screaming crickets.

Anything to shut out the screaming voices in her head.

Where was Ellen?

Where was Scott?

Where was Tiffany?

She heard a twig snap. She cocked her head in the direction of the noise as she stopped swinging. And then she heard a soft thud. Something rolled to her feet and rested against her ankle. Something round and hard. She slowly reached down and touched it.

An apple.

Probably one of the few remaining apples on the old apple tree in her backyard.

Then she heard footsteps. Walking toward her. Slowly, sneakily.

"Ellen?" Alicia called out nervously.

"Ali."

Alicia's heart skipped a beat. "Scott?" She rose from *the swing and ran to his voice. "Scott*…?" *Where was* he?

Scott took her in his arms, his powerful, athletic arms.

How she had missed being there.

How she had missed his lips. She kissed him long and hard.

Scott was cold. His body was tense, rigid like a rock. It was like kissing a stone boy. One of his hands felt like a big round club.

"That's one of the things Evan did," Scott said, pulling away. "There's a cast on my hand. The hand that threw the football that hit him in the face.

You get my meaning? I came to warn you to stay away from that guy. He's dangerous. He's sicker than any of us ever imagined."

"That's a lie!" Alicia had been so thrilled that Scott had to come to visit her. Why did he have to ruin everything this way? By making up more lies about Evan. The boy who had saved her life. The boy who gave her hope that she might one day see again.

"It's not a lie," Scott said.

Alicia let him talk. She touched his face. She ran her soft fingers over his nose and cheeks — curious, probing fingers that had to substitute for her eyes.

Alicia felt the horror of what had been done. She could barely continue her reading of his tragedy.

Scott had a long, deep gash across his forehead, and a series of pitted lines over each cheek. His nose had been smashed flat. His lips were dry. There were teeth missing. Alicia pulled away with a distraught cry.

"He did my nose and forehead, my teeth, and my hand with the tire iron while you were out cold," Scott said. "I don't know what he did to destroy the rest of *my face*. I was knocked out by then too. I'm telling you, he's an animal. A very *sick* animal."

"Did you *see* him do it?" she asked, fighting back the tears.

"I didn't have to. I know it was him."

"He *saved* your life, Scott."

"So he could torture me," Scott said. "So I'd have to live the rest of my life like this. Alicia, this is the first time I've been out of the house since they took the bandages off. I can't even look at myself in the mirror without throwing up. And he didn't stop with me. He went after the others too — Boomer… Tiffany…"

"Did you *see* him do anything to Boomer or Tiffany?"

"I *know* it was him!" Scott screamed.

"Well, / *don't* know it was him, Scott. And do you know why? I didn't *see* him because I'm *blind!*" Alicia felt her face dampen with tears. "Where were you when I needed you, Scott? You deserted me when I needed you the most."

A car door slammed and the sound of neighbors' voices floated over to Alicia and Scott.

"D-don't you understand? I–I can't be seen like this," Scott stammered. "I don't want your neighbors to see my face. The only reason I can be with

you now is that you're blind."

"I don't care about your *face*!" Alicia screamed. "I wouldn't care if I saw the scars. Scott… it's *you* I love!" She hugged him fiercely. But his arms hung limply at his sides. Then he broke the embrace and pushed her away.

Alicia reached out to try to stop him from leaving — she needed more comfort. She needed Scott to hold her in his arms and tell her that everything would be all right. But when she tried to grab him, to stop him, he was already out of reach.

"Scott…?" she cried out.

But Scott was gone.

Scott had deserted her again.

The phone rang.

She stood frozen.

The phone rang a second time.

Don't answer it, she thought. Don't bother. It's probably more bad news.

The phone rang a third time.

I'll let Mom get it.

The phone rang a fourth time. Then a fifth.

"Mom?"

Finally on the sixth ring, Alicia stumbled across the yard and through the kitchen door and around the Formica table — knocking over a kitchen chair — and moved her hand along the wall with fluttering, spiderlike fingers until she found the phone and lifted it from the cradle.

She didn't even bother to say hello.

"Ali?" came Evan's voice, quiet but penetrating.

The phone receiver felt like lead in her hand. "Evan," she said, her voice hollow. Like a voice in a dream.

"Um… the homecoming dance is tomorrow night and I was wondering if you had made up your mind yet. Do you want to go with me?"

He was out of sync, Alicia thought. Inappropriate. He was so kind, so gentle. How could he not realize that this subject just didn't fit?

Why was she so cold all of a sudden? So cold and alone and sad. She stretched the phone cord so she could check the kitchen window. It was open. She pushed it down and it slammed shut.

"Ali?"

"Okay, Evan," Alicia heard herself say. "I'll go to the homecoming dance with you."

Chapter 33

The doors to the school gym wouldn't open until nine, but Alicia was in no hurry. The crowning of the homecoming queen was to take place at ten-thirty, but she was in no hurry for that, either.

She was in no hurry for anything, anymore.

Alicia wore a plain white gown with a ribbon that matched the color of her hair around her slender waist. It was the gown she had made months ago for this special night — a night she had planned to share with Scott…

Evan picked her up at eight forty-five, exactly as he had promised. He presented her with a wrist corsage — he told her it was made of pink carnations (not roses!) and baby's breath. He told her she looked beautiful and politely asked if she was ready to go to the dance. He was so clearly trying to do everything right.

Suddenly, he gave her the creeps.

She had no idea what Evan wore, but it smelled of mothballs. She supposed it was a hand-me-down from his uncle, probably an old tuxedo Dr. Hawke had held onto from his own school days. It probably looked ridiculous on Evan — out of style, hanging off him.

She felt dizzy, hardly able to think of why she had even agreed to go with this strange guy. But she liked to keep her word, and so they set out for the dance.

She and Evan created quite a stir when they entered the gym at quarter after nine. Alicia could hear the voices buzzing as Evan led her to a chair. He sat next to her and wrapped his long, slender fingers lightly around her hand. She didn't pull her hand away. She owed him that much, she felt. She gave his sweaty palm a squeeze that she hoped seemed friendly.

Alicia knew she was on display — like a rare bug in a bottle. She understood that Evan had invited her to show everyone that he could get a date. Of course, the best he could do was a blind girl. *A blind date.* A blind date. Alicia winced at her own sick joke.

"You're the most beautiful girl here, Ali," Evan said.

When had he started calling her «Ali»? She couldn't remember. "Thank you, Evan," she said softly. She left her hand limply in his. It seemed like too much effort to do anything else now.

The music started up, and it was loud. Alicia felt she could still hear everyone whispering about her.

Was this what it was like for Evan all the time, she wondered. Knowing that everyone was whispering about him?

Evan attempted to be her "eyes." He described the giant throne where the queen would be crowned. He even giggled when he told her it was made of *roses.* If one rose could make her sneeze — what would a throne of roses do, he wondered. If she were chosen queen, she'd probably detonate right in front of everyone.

Alicia allowed herself a small smile. Why not? As long as she was there, she should try to have a good time.

"I hope we're not sitting *too* close to the throne," Alicia said, leaning over to Evan, plugging her nose as she faked a sneeze.

Evan laughed loudly. "If you win I hope you can hold your breath for a long time," he guffawed. "But hey, don't worry, I brought plenty of tissues. And this time I'm keeping my distance." He giggled more than he really needed to.

The band played a mixture of modern rock and sixties oldies. Alicia realized she was tapping her foot in time to the music.

Almost like a normal girl having a good time on a date.

The band moved into a slow number, and Alicia felt Evan's breath on her ear. "Shall we?" he whispered.

Alicia's heart sank. A slow dance with someone other than Scott. It was a crushing disappointment. But her psychiatrist had encouraged her to get out and try to enjoy herself. Evan led her to the center of the dance floor and took her awkwardly in his trembling arms. She thought she heard some murmuring from the dancers nearby, but she ignored it. After an awkward moment, Evan let both his arms slip around her waist and pulled her closer to him.

She could smell his Aqua Velva. Probably his uncle's.

The murmuring grew louder.

Alicia pressed her chin into Evan's shoulder as they swirled round and round the dance floor.

With her eyes tightly shut, Alicia imagined that she wasn't blind. When the dance was over, she would open her eyes and see all her classmates in their beautiful clothes twirling to the music. She would look into the eyes of her dance partner — Alicia imagined Scott — looking back at her with

love. But then her imagination turned cruel, and in her mind she saw Scott's face melt like candle wax on a hot day, remolded into a horrible mask covered with scars and stitches.

Alicia gasped.

"Are you all right?" Evan asked, concerned.

"I think I'd like to sit down now," Alicia answered. She breathed deeply.

Evan led her back to their table. Then he disappeared to get them something to drink. Alicia was grateful to be alone for a moment. Without her sight, she could never be sure when Evan was looking at her — staring at her. Sometimes she felt his gaze wash over her like a burning flame. She didn't want him looking at her now, though. Not while she thought of Scott.

She longed for him now, as she did every day and every night. She imagined his lips near her ear, whispering that he still loved her, promising that they would be together forever. She wanted to feel his touch again. She wanted to see the boy she still loved.

As Evan returned with the punch, the band suddenly stopped playing. A microphone crackled with static as the announcement was made that the homecoming queen was about to be crowned.

Alicia was surprised to feel a surge of energy that overwhelmed her self-pity. She realized how desperately she wanted to be named Homecoming Queen. If for no other reason than to beat Ellen Sawyer. Ellen — her pretend-friend.

Alicia held her breath as the candidates' names were announced one by one. Then she heard her name. A deafening roar threatened to take the roof off the gymnasium. Her eyes filled with tears.

And she had told herself not to cry!

A myriad of emotions rushed through her mind. What if she actually won? The votes hadn't all been cast by the time of her accident. It was possible.

If she got the sympathy vote.

If everyone took pity on her. If everyone felt sorry for her.

The thought made her cry despite herself.

Evan gently dabbed away her tears with a handkerchief.

"Do I look all right?" she asked.

"Everything is fine," Evan assured her. "You're beautiful."

She leaned her head on Evan's shoulder, wishing it were Scott's…

And then she sat straight up when she heard the rip of the envelope next to the open mike. The envelope with the little slip of paper in it naming the winner.

Alicia's heart was pounding so hard it threatened to erupt inside her chest. Her lower lip began to tremble and she couldn't make it stop. Evan squeezed her hand encouragingly.

"Ladies and gentlemen…"

Her knees were shaking.

"Let's hear it for Springwood High's new Homecoming Queen — Ellen Sawyer!"

The crowd erupted with applause.

Alicia felt the instant evaporation of her soul. The last shred of purpose in her life had been taken from her. She couldn't even win if she sacrificed her eyes.

And then an eerie silence settled over the cavernous gymnasium.

"What happened?" Alicia whispered to Evan.

"Ellen's not here to accept the crown. That means if you're runner-up, you'll be the queen," Evan said excitedly.

Alicia entertained that thought — even if she won as runner-up, based on a sympathy vote, it would still be the best thing that had happened to her since…

Suddenly, Alicia felt the table tip and heard Evan yelp in pain. A cup of punch spilled over onto her arm. "Evan? What's going on?" she asked fearfully. She reached out to where he had been just a moment before — but he was gone!

She heard the crashes as tables and chairs were tipped over. Angry shouts filled the gym. Some of the students were chanting: "Fight! Fight! Fight!" She heard a boy yell, "Beat the crap out of him, Murphy!"

Johnny Murphy was fighting, and Alicia knew in the pit of her stomach that it was with Evan. For the first time since she had become blind, Alicia was glad she couldn't see.

She heard teachers' voices and the principal's voice and the scuffle was over as quickly as it had begun. The band started up again, trying to get things back on track. But she still could hear the voice screaming. Johnny's voice, screaming as he was being led away. "You killed Ellen! You killed Ellen, and you're going to pay for it! You hear me — Walker?"

Chapter 34

"Alicia," the principal said, "I'm going to allow Evan to drive you home."

Alicia nodded weakly. She felt sick to her stomach. Sitting outside the principal's office was not exactly how she had expected the evening to wind down. "What about Ellen?"

"She's not here, so you're the official Homecoming Queen," the principal offered. "It's never happened this way before, but that's how we'll officially settle it."

"Don't you want to go back in to be crowned?" Evan asked his date.

Alicia shook her head. "I want to know where Ellen is. Something's riot right. She'd never miss this night unless something extreme kept her away. I feel very nervous."

"She's probably hiding, trying to stand up that ape Johnny," Evan suggested.

"That's enough, Evan," the principal said, his voice less concerned than Alicia thought it should be. "I've sent Johnny home, and I think he's learned his lesson." Alicia could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had always liked this principal, but now she realized that those had been the good old days when everything went right. Now that there were real problems, she was beginning to understand why some of the parents thought he was ineffective.

"Did you try to call Ellen's house?" Alicia asked.

"Yes," the principal answered. "Nobody home. *I* left a message on the answering machine."

"C'mon, Ali, I'll take you home, and you can try to call her again from there." Evan was standing next to her now, ready to guide her out to the car. "Maybe you'd like to stop for an ice cream on the way home." Alicia's mind was whirling. How could Evan make such a suggestion under these circumstances? He had just been hit and kicked, beaten up at the homecoming dance. Ellen was missing, Tiffany was missing, Boomer was tragically crippled, Scott mutilated, and she was blind!

She wanted out of here. She wanted to be alone. She wished she could escape to another world, even if only for a few minutes.

"C'mon," Evan said again. "You're tired. I'll get you home."

*** * ***

Alicia's stomach felt feathery the entire ride home, and it only got worse when Evan pulled into her driveway.

Evan shut off the car. Alicia wished she could as easily turn off her doubts, her apprehension, her misgivings about Evan.

She didn't expect what happened next: Evan reached over and tried to kiss her.

Startled, she pulled away. "Don't do that Evan," she said, not intending to sound so shrill.

But Evan tightened his grip on her shoulders and tried to kiss her again.

"Ow… Evan! You're hurting me! Stop!"

"Sorry," Evan muttered and his hands slipped away. Alicia rubbed her shoulders where Evan had squeezed her so hard. For a guy with soft hands, he had a grip of steel.

Evan tried to kiss her again.

Alicia pulled away. She quickly slid across the car seat and banged her back against the passenger-side door.

But Evan was on her again in an instant.

She pushed him away as hard as she could and groped for the door handle.

"Evan — please! Please don't. I–I'm sorry, Evan. But… but I like you only as a *friend."*

Evan grabbed her arm and tried to pull her to him.

"Evan…" She twisted away, catching the sleeve of her gown on the car door handle. She yanked up and the door unexpectedly popped open, sending her sprawling to the cold, concrete driveway.

She heard the porch light click on.

"What's going on out there?" came her mother's voice.

Thank goodness, Alicia thought as a cool bite of wind nipped her face. She stood up and walked unsteadily toward her mother's voice.

The car engine suddenly roared. Evan tore backward out of the driveway, tires squealing. Then the hearse stopped, shifted to forward, and

flew away into the night. She heard the passenger door slam shut of its own accord.

Chapter 35

The next morning Evan called Alicia to apologize. "I'm really sorry about everything that happened last night, Ali. It just seems like no matter what I do, it comes out wrong. I never meant to hurt you. Please believe me. I would die for you…"

"Evan…" Alicia broke in. "Don't say things like that."

"It's true."

"Just don't say it."

"Do you forgive me?" Evan asked.

"I forgive you," Alicia said. It wasn't the first time a guy had put the moves on her.

"Can I see you again?" Evan asked.

"Urn… I don't know, Evan. Maybe that wouldn't be such a great idea." Alicia squirmed as a silence lengthened between them. "Evan… it just isn't going to work out. I'm sorry." She realized her voice was shaking. From fear? Fear of what Evan might do to her if he got angry enough?"

"I see," Evan finally said.

"But thanks, you know, for everything." Alicia knew her words sounded forced.

Alicia expected Evan to be upset, maybe even angry. But she didn't expect him to start giggling — which he did. The giggles turned into a loud, cackling laugh.

Like his uncle's laughter when he had examined her in his warm basement office.

Outside, the wind whistled sharply.

Maybe he's hysterical, Alicia thought. Instead of crying, he's laughing.

"I'm sorry," Alicia said again, wishing she could think of some way to quickly end the conversation.

"Don't be," Evan told her. "No problem. Stuff happens."

Alicia knew Evan was just putting up a brave front to save face.

A blast of cold air rattled the windows.

It would be winter soon.

"Really, it's okay. Besides, that's not even what I called you about," Evan went on excitedly. "I mean, I wanted to say I'm sorry and all, but what

I really wanted to tell you is the great news my uncle gave me. He says he spotted something on your X rays he didn't see before and wants you to come over for another examination. He wants to check you out with some kind of machine. I don't want to get your hopes up too much, Ali, but there's a very good possibility that he can help you. Can you come over?"

With the speed of a guillotine blade, Alicia's mood went from low to high.

The news was great! Unbelievable!

If only it were true.

"I don't know, Evan. I want to. But last night. Everything that's happened. I don't know if I feel right about it. It's kind of like I'm taking advantage of you."

"Forget about last night, Ali. I have. It's just not a problem."

"When could I come?" she asked anxiously, unable to stall herself any longer.

"Right now if you want. I'll come get you."

"Evan… I don't know how to thank you. You've done so much. I just…"

"It's nothing, Ali." Evan broke in. "Like I said — I'd die for you…"

Chapter 36

Scott drove down Elm Street in his parents' Civic. It was only the second time he had been out since the accident.

The moon was round and golden in the sky.

A full moon.

He had to see Alicia again. He was plagued with guilt. He had been speeding that night. He had caused the accident, caused her blindness. There was no way he could make it up to her. He still loved her, he knew. He always knew that. But could she ever love him again?

Could any girl love a boy who looked like this?

He pulled the hood of the sweatshirt tightly around his scarred face. He hoped no one would recognize his parents' car.

He was gambling that Alicia would be home. He hadn't called first. What if she was still mad at him? No, he'd surprise her, like he had with his other visit. She had been so happy to see him.

Until he had mentioned Evan…

He was almost at Alicia's house. He would summon up all his courage to tell her how he felt. He wasn't good at talking about his feelings, but Alicia deserved an explanation. She deserved to know what was in his heart.

Scott gritted his teeth as he passed Evan's house. He should have driven another route so he wouldn't be reminded that the murderous creep lived practically next door to his girlfriend. If Evan ever laid a hand on Alicia, so much as hurt one beautiful hair on her beautiful head…

Scott slammed on the brakes in front of Evan's house.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

Evan was leading Alicia inside his house!

Now just what the hell was that all about?

Scott felt dizzy with anger. His instinct was to rush to Alicia's side and pull her from that bastard's clutch. And just as he was ready to do so, he stopped himself. He remembered how Alicia reacted the last time he accused Evan of evil doings. He decided to wait. He had to talk to her in private, away from Evan's influence. He had to talk to her tonight.

He parked the car across the street.

And waited beneath the light of the bright, full moon.

Chapter 37

"I'm going to examine you with an ophthalmoscope. It's an instrument that examines the interior of the eye," Dr. Hawke told Alicia. "It might hurt a little bit, so I'm going to put you to sleep first."

Alicia felt very nervous. She hadn't expected this. She didn't even have time to protest before Evan was holding her shoulders down, and she felt something being fitted over her nose and mouth. She tried to call out, but the apparatus muffled her voice.

"No!" Alicia screamed and fought back as gas whooshed through a hose. Almost immediately she felt different, better. Don't fight it, a voice inside her head advised.

Dreamlike images filled her mind. But what she saw was so horrible, she wished for the darkness again. She pressed her eyes tightly together. One part of her brain told her she was dreaming — this was just another nightmare…

*** * ***

Dr. Hawke was standing over her wearing a green surgical mask, his face only inches from her own. His eyes above the mask were like blazing flames flying out of his skull. Alicia saw the lower part of the mask move — was Dr. Hawke smiling?

Then Dr. Hawke began sharpening some kind of instrument. A surgical instrument to operate with? Alicia wondered as she took in the rest of the room. Behind him, a boiler roared to life, like a vast, iron creature with a belly full of blazing coals. She looked up toward the ceiling. It was so dark, it seemed like the ceiling was as high as a cathedral's. She saw three pulley chains dangling down from the gloom above. At the end of each chain was a sharp, gleaming hook, as big as a bear's claw. A flash of light reflected off the hooks, and Alicia blinked. When she opened her eyes a moment later, there was a body swinging from each hook. The bodies were all facing away from her, but one by one they swung around to face her.

No! Alicia screamed.

The first was Tiffany. Tire tread marks ran over her crushed chest.

The second was Ellen. She had Johnny's red dragon switchblade knife embedded in her skull.

The third was Evan. He had a whimsical smile playing across his sad, wan face.

A peaceful smile.

All three bodies had empty eye sockets.

The doctor peered closely at Alicia, his face very close to her now, but even behind the mask she could smell his fetid, putrid breath. He lived and breathed death. If she didn't get out of there that moment, she knew she too would die. As her friends had died. Horrible, violent, senseless deaths.

The boiler room glowed with a wicked, red color, andsteam hissed from rusty pipes everywhere. Lethal flames danced inside the boiler.

The doctor grinned, chuckled, and raised his surgical instrument…No!

A razor glove! In that moment, Alicia knew she was face to face with the source of her nightmares. She struggled against the restraints that kept her in the chair. She fought the feelings of overwhelming panic. She had to stay sane. She had to think, if she was going to get away from this madman. This murderer.

One by one the razor-tipped fingers unfurled from a tight fist. At the tip of each spike was an eyeball — four in all.

"These wouldn't do," said the doctor in a gravelly voice, casually flicking the eyeballs away. "So I had to use Evan's."

His face was very close to hers, now, and she could see a face ravaged by burnt scar tissue.

The doctor cackled madly. "What a shame. You know, I could see he had eyes only for you."

Dr. Hawke ripped off the surgical mask.

Except it wasn't Dr. Hawke.

A scream ripped out of Alicia's throat.

"Freddy Krueger!"

*** * ***

Scott's eyes flashed open. He must have dozed off in the car. He'd had the most horrible nightmare. That was what had woken him up — a scream.

In his dream.

Then he heard the scream again.

Alicia's scream.

It was no nightmare.

The scream came from Evan's house.

Scott exploded from the car and ran.

Chapter 38

Alicia felt strong arms encircle her. She opened her eyes.

Was it still the nightmare? That last one was the worst of all. She had dreamt that she was in a boiler room. Freddy Krueger had killed Dr. Hawke the night of the lightning storm. Since then, he'd been living inside the doctor's hollow shell. Living to kill. To kill her friends. Then her.

"Alicia! Thank God you're all right." Scott's voice brought tears to her eyes. The tears blurred her vision and washed away the scars on Scott's face. Alicia could see again.

But then Alicia looked up and saw the blazing boiler. The contents caught her attention. She could barely make out three human forms burning inside. She closed her eyes again.

Was it a nightmare? Or had it all really happened? Had Freddy Krueger tried to kill her? When she turned back to Scott, his scarred face was visible again. But instead of feeling repulsed, she felt a wave of love. Scott had saved her!

"I'll have you out of here in a minute," Scott said, unfastening the bonds that had made Alicia a prisoner in the operating chair. Alicia watched Scott work to dislodge the shackles.

He wasn't self-conscious. He didn't know she could see again, Alicia realized.

Then Scott lifted her in his arms and carried her outside.

Epilogue

In the hellish void of the boiler room, amid the damp rot smell and clots of dried rat droppings, within the cold, gray walls and next to the bright, crackling furnace — inside the house of terror that Freddy ruled — sat Evan — or what had once, in another lifetime, been Evan. He was strapped into an examination chair.

"Evan?" a girl's voice called.

"Watch us," said another.

Dr. Freddy had replaced Evan's eyeballs.

Tiffany's body was crushed, and Ellen still had Johnny 's knife embedded in her skull. Dead Tiffany and dead Ellen were both dressed in cheerleader uniforms, practicing their jumps for Evan. They moved in a mechanical, rag-doll kind of way. Then Evan noticed the strings that were attached to their limbs. Each time a string jerked, their arms and legs would move.

Evan followed the strings up toward the rafters of thebasement. He saw Freddy Krueger sitting comfortably astride one of the wooden beams, his legs dangling.

He was the puppeteer.

Evan had always wanted to be noticed by these beautiful girls, and now, at last, he had them all to himself Unfortunately, they were now so grotesque looking that they made him want to puke.

But Evan had no choice but to keep watching. Uncle Freddy had sewn his eyelids open.

Evan would spend the rest of eternity gazing at what he could never have in real life.

Be careful what you wish for…